Tibor Takacs

The Gate

Horror movies — and other genres too — can be loosely divided into two opposing camps: the mainstream and the extreme. The extreme — **Videodrome**, **The Brood** — offers lots and lots of what the filmmaker figures you're paying your money for: suspense, thrills, terror, gore, never-before-seen sights and (much more rarely) never-before-thought ideas and glimpses into dark corners a lot of us would rather pretend do not exist. These are the movies that get some people very upset and generate pro-censorship movements.

The mainstream — **The Fly**, **Dead Zone** — offers carefully measured amounts of the above, watered down just enough so as not to turn off any potential ticket buyers. These are the movies that get network sales in prime-time slots and generate lots of lovely ad revenue, not to mention good notices in the daily papers. You could summarize the split by saying, 'real horror' versus 'horror for people who don't really like horror' movies. But that would hardly be fair.

The Gate is mainstream horror all the way. From its cute, suburban, pre-teen protagonists, through its very conventional camera angles and deliberately softened shock cuts (softened by allowing one or both of the shots involved to run a few frames too long), to its impossibly happy ending, **The Gate** aims for mainstream mass-market money all the way.

Okay, let's cut the flow of bullshit for a moment. The rest of this review is irrelevant. it's the kind of crap you've read a thousand times before and it won't tell you anything you don't know, need to know, or can't figure out for yourself. There is one thing, and one thing only, worth saying about **The Gate***: it is a vicious, venal lie, a corruption and denial of the highest values of art and the core value of fairy tales — the value of truth, truth presented as fable or allegory so that all of us, and especially the kids, can see quite clearly the operations of good and evil, virtue and vice, innocence and experience, strength and weakness — the actions of human beings and their consequences — particularly their consequences.*

The Gate *is a fairy tale — do I need to explain how horror movies are very often fairy tales? Naw, you already know that. A fairy tale: the cowardly kid finds the courage to use the weapons of love and light to beat back the force of darkness. And it works and it's fine... And then everybody who got killed comes back to life again and it's a slap in the face to any real emotion you might have invested in the characters, but more, far more important — it's a lie. Dead is dead. People don't come back like they were before — not in life and not in fantasy. They don't come back because there's always a price to pay with evil, because real actions have real consequences, because fantasy — honest fantasy and not mindlessly cobbled-together gobbledygook and special effects — is about truth and we all know that truth about death, don't we, despite what our secret five-year-old selves tell us we want. Remember being five and pleading with whatever unseen force you just knew controlled the universe: "Please, please, make it didn't happen"? This is a movie that feeds into that infantile misapprehension and denies all your hard-earned knowledge and all the knowledge you hope and pray your kids are going to grow into. Whoever made that decision — the decision to rip us all off — should be condemned to write horoscopes forever.*

...Now, back to our regularly scheduled review.

We were talking about mainstream and extreme films and I was just about to tell you that there is nothing inherently wrong with being mainstream. **The Fly** is a terrific movie, so for that matter is **Poltergeist** and, as box office figures tell us, the mainstream audience really gets off on its mainstream nightmares.

Getting the mainstream audience off is partly a matter of setting up expectations that are later satisfied — unlike the extreme, where the more audience expectations you destroy, the bigger hit you're likely to wind up with. **The Gate**'s L.A.-based scenarist, Michael Nankin, sets up the hero's best friend as a troubled kid — mother dead, father absent a lot — with a cruel streak, so we might reasonably expect him to do a little aiding and abetting on behalf of the forces of evil. No such luck. The kid performs for the forces of good all the way, except for a brief interlude as a zombie — which isn't his fault; he got captured. The hero himself is set up as an object of scorn for the teenagers around him. Does he rescue his worst tormentor? Do any of them witness his bravery and triumph? Nope.

On the other hand, Nankin twice gives us payoffs without set-up. The family dog emerges alive at the end and everyone gathers around to stroke it. It's supposed to be heartwarming, but nobody bothered to make the dog into a character in the first place. The undead workman — one of the film's three main menaces — is supposedly a supernatural incarnation of one of our hero's key personal terrors. But check the set-up, which ran something like this:

"Dad, Terry told me there's a dead workman behind the wall and I'm scared."

"Don't be, son. Your friend made it up because he's still upset over his mother's death. Take him with a grain of salt and treat him gently."

"Okay, Dad."

And that's it. I'm condensing and paraphrasing, but that's basically it: tell us about the fear, tell us about the cruel friend, but don't show us either. It's not enough to make the undead workman a big deal when he finally does show up.

The three leads — Stephen Dorff as the hero, Glen, Louis Tripp as his friend, Terry, and Christa Denton as Al, the sister torn between her teenage impulses and her affection for her kid brother — all have appealing, middle-class cute faces and all are decent actors. Tripp is a newcomer, but the others have done TV, commercials and one or more TV movies.

But their scenes together are oddly flat, as though director Tibor Takacs either feared to milk the emotional moments lest he be accused, perhaps, of Spielberg-ism or simply missed their point. One has to look carefully and analyze the dialogue to realize that this scene signals the start of a real brother-sister rift, or that one is meant to pinpoint loneliness and friendship.

Likeable characters are a mainstream expectation, expecially in Spielberg territory, **The Gate**'s chosen ground. In an extreme film, like **Evil Dead II**, character can be reduced to behaviour in the face of life-threatening situations, because those are the only situations happening. In the mainstream, big character moments are important — not least because they keep you interested while you're waiting for the booga-booga to start up.

It takes a full 45 minutes for the booga-booga to start and **The Gate** just can't support the wait. Yes, there's a scary dream to open the movie and a few shivery foreshadowings to carry it along. But they aren't nearly good enough to carry you over the blank character moments, the witless insult humour (sample: "G'bye, Faggot"), the clunky exposition...

An aside: the plot is this: backyard tree gets dug up, thereby opening the way for a dark, pre-Christian god to come through and rule the world. The kids inadvertently perform the necessary rituals. The god comes through. The hero sends it back. This kind of stuff needs explaining, so Nankin invents a heavy metal band that uses the relevant lore and then writes two scenes, the first showing Terry figuring out what's happening, the second showing Terry telling Glen what we've just seen him figure out. And Takacs leaves both scenes in the final cut. One is enough, or would be if they weren't so badly shot that, even with both, we get only a vague notion of the supernatural system at work here. One thing he does make perfectly clear, though: as we watch in close-up a record being played backward by hand, Terry tells us, in no uncertain terms, that he's playing a record backward by hand. End of aside.

... the pointless conflicts. The audience I saw it with was restless and bored, hooting at the scary bits, talking through the rest and paying attention only in one black comedy sequence — guy lugs around a dead dog, unable to get rid of it — that seemed to belong more in another movie.

Complaining that the booga-booga isn't good enough to support the picture is a bit misleading — once it gets going it's fine. We've got Melting Dad, Undead Workman, Miniature Demons, Giant Fish-Head-On-a-Turd Dark God, Tunnel To Hell, Erupting Floor, Cosmic Darkness and Utterly Meaningless But Really Evocative Living Eye In A Hand and they're all executed with top-of-the-line professionalism by special effects man Randall Cook and special make-up artist Craig Reardon, whose credits between them include **2010**, **Ghostbusters**, **Fright Night**, **The Thing**, **American Werewolf in London**, **Mean Season** and **Altered States**. They are also all worked into a sequence of battles, victories, sudden reversals and stalk-and-shock scenes that moved with enough speed and escalation to get the audience to sit up and pay attention.

I know next to nothing of the functions of the director in special effects sequences, but since critical convention demands all praise and all blame to be attributed to the director, I can only say that Tibor Takacs demonstrates an overall level of competence far beyond that generally associated with Canadian horror movies — excepting, of course, those of David Cronenberg. I have seen none of his previous works — **Metal Messiah**, **Snow**, **The Trouble With Trolls**, **Tales from a Toyshop**, **The Tomorrow Man** — but the latter picked

• The Gate

up a CFTA award in 1980 and the others have received domestic and foreign awards and nominations at festival screenings.

Competence is maybe the single most important mainstream quality. We can ignore bad acting, mickeymouse effects and glaring technical flubs in the extreme movies — we're too busy being scared to care — but the mainstream audience, wired into Hollywood standards, demands the gloss of the well-made picture. **The Gate** has it. In terms of presentation there's nothing major-league awful here. At worst, it's flat and pointless. At best, though, there's nothing great, nothing to give any but the least experienced viewer a rush of real pleasure or thrill.

At best, **The Gate** is competent. Which is about as mainstream as you can get.

Andrew Dowler •

THE GATE A New Century Entertainment Corporation presentation in association with the Vista Organization Ltd An Alliance Entertainment/ John Kemeny Production **d.** Tibor Takacs **sc** Michael Nankin **p.** John Kemeny **co-p.** Andras Hamori **d.o.p.** Thomas Vamos **prod. des.** William Beeton **ed.** Rit Wallis **spfx des. and sup.** Randall William Cook **sp. makeup** Craig Reardon **mus.** Michael Hoenig, J. Peter Robinson **cast.** Mary Gail Artz, Clare Walker **prod. man.** Robert Wertheimer **1st a.d.** Michael Zenon **2nd. a.d.** Bill Bannerman **3rd a.d.** Kathleen Meade **sc. sup** Nancy Eagles **loc. man.** Woody Sidarous **1st asst. cam.** Daniel Vincelette **2nd. asst. cam.** John Davidson **add. cam. op.** Malcolm Cross **set photog.** Takahi Seida **loc. sd.** Doug Ganton **boom** Reynald Trudel **key grip** Michael O'Connor **grip** Bert Gouweleeuw, Scott Keares, Tom O'Reilley, Lee Wright **gaffer** Richard Allen **best boy** Craig Wright **elec.** Mark Woodley, Erk Tahysen, Paul Court, Gabriel Dichiara, Ross Edmunds, Ken Hillier, Dan Piva **asst art d.** Barry Birnberg, Julia Bourque **set dec.** Jeff Cutler, Marlene Graham **asst set dec.** Zana Ancerl **prop. master** Liz Calderhead **prop man** Adrian Hardy **art dept. p.a.** Stephen Levitt **construct co-ord** Helene Lafrance **head carp** Rejean Brochu **carp.** Andre Brochu, Michel Brochu, Serge Gagne, Jean Marie Vallerand, Robert Sher, Sheldon Walters, William Armstrong, Joe Hampson **landscaping** Wm. J. White and Associates **scenic artist** Steve Willetts **painters** Shannon F. Griffiths, Frank Lefeuvre, Terri Aikenhead **prod. acc.** Joanne Jackson **asst. acc.** Loretta Van Hart **prod. co-ord** Fran Solomon **prod. sec.** Gina Fowler **asst. to Mr. Kemeny** Vicki Ahrens **asst. to Mr. Hamori** Arlene D. Hay **pub.** Janice Kaye **sp. cultpt.** Reet Puhm, Film Arts Inc. **Angus doll** Lisa Smith **spfx** Frank Carere **asst spfx** Deborah Tiffen, Jordan Craig **spfx p.a.** John Bakker **blue screen assembly** Mutabilis Scenic Services Inc **costum des.** Trysha Bakker **ward.** Sylvie Bonniere **make-up** Linda Preston **hairdresser** Jenny Arbour **tutors** Mary Davie, Wendy Beck **driver capt.** Dan Dunlop **drivers** Gabe Fallus, Ted Fanyeck, Mark Moore, Barney Bayliss **catering/ craft service** Zee's Catering **moths supp. by** Northern Animal Exchange **trainer** Gerry Therrien **dog wrangler** Jane Conway *second unit* **d.o.p.** Peter Benison **asst. d.** Judi Kemeny **asst. cam.** Dan Roy **key grip** Brian Potts **gaffer** Kenneth Salah **elec.** Bill Buttery **prod. asst.** Terry Gould, John B. Lind **Visual effects prod. at** Illusion Arts Inc. **matte photog** Bill Tayoler **Matte sup.** Syd Dutton *Illusion Arts Crew* **visual fx cam.** Mark Freund **sp. rigging** Lynn Ledgerwood **prod. co-ord** Mark Sawicki **anim.** Catherine Sudolcan **matte artist** Mark Whitlock **optical co-ord** David Williams *Randy Cook's Crew* Fumi Mahimo, Jim Aupperle, Michael F. Hoover *Craig Reardon's Crew* Michael Mills, Kent Jones, Frank Carrisosa, Mark Wilson, Keith Edmier **sd. ed.** David Evans, Wayne Griffin, Steven Munro, Jane Tattersall, Robin Leigh, Rick Cadger **post-prod. sup.** H. Gordon Woodside **assoc. pic. ed.** H. Gordon Woodside **assoc. pic. ed.** Susan Schneir **music ed.** Carl Zittrer, Jim Weidman **Foley** Mike Liotta, terry Burke **re-rec.** Joe Grimaldi, Dino Pigat **2nd. ass. ed.** Charlene Olson **asst. sd. eds.** Susan Maggi, Sandra Moffat, Cherie MacNeill, David Giammarco *No Pleasure* song and video by Eva Everything (Great Shakes Productions) *Everybody' Running* by Vince Carlucci and Sandy Macfayden *Love Will Find a Way* by Vince Carlucci (Secret Songs Publications *Delusions of Grandeur* by Carl Tafel, performed by Terraced Garden (Melody and Menace Records) *Yes It's True* and *Modern Personality* by Julia Bourque, performed by True Confessions (Bomb Records) **colour** Medallion Film Laboratories Ltd **sd. facilities** Soundmix Ltd./ Pathe sound and post-production centre **titles** Film Opticals Canada Ltd **(Dolby Stereo, Nabet l.p.)** Stephen Dorff, Christa Denton, Louis Tripp, Kelly Rowan, Jennifer Irwin, Deborah Grover, Scot Denton, Incrid Beninger, Sean Fagan, Linda Goranson, Carl Kraines, Andrew Gunn. **stunts** Randy Kamula, Peter Cox, Leslie Munro

Lewis Furey's

Champagne for Two

and Mort Ransen's

Sincerely, Violet

As the continuing success of **Dallas**, **Dynasty** and the *Harlequin* novels prove, the public's appetite for love is unsatiated, maybe even insatiable. The words and images of Love are gobbled up by the reading and viewing audience as fast as they can be produced. To satisfy this voracious appetite, Astral Film Enterprises has brought us **Shades of Love**, a series of eight contemporary romance movies. **Shades of Love** is an attempt to transfer the immensely popular romance novel to film. The romance novel in question is not the early *Harlequin* variety that first comes to mind: insecure waif initiated into womanhood by worldweary man who falls in love with her intoxicating innocence and energy, marries her, and takes care of her — but one that has adapted to changing times.

The 'new' romance novel, on which **Shades of Love** is based, has incorporated into its formula certain inescapable truths of our society the older one avoided: work, gray hairs, sexual experience, stretch marks, failed marriages, etc. However, this is nothing more than a facelift. The skeletal plot remains intact — they meet, clash, fall in love, separate, return to each other, marry and, of course, live happily ever after. But it was never the plot that attracted readers except, perhaps, for its familiarity. The appeal has always been its language, its preoccupation with the heroine and her handling of the romantic situation and the access it gave to vicariously fall in love.

The language of the romance novel is purposefully vague and traditionally veiled in an idiom of sensation that allows the reader to actively participate, filling in precise detail according to personal preference. The final product is as much the creation of the reader as it is of the writer.

The most important element of the romance novel is the heroine. And it is in her depiction that the facelift is most obvious. She is now a fiercely independent and successful career woman who, having already been involved in a disastrous relationship, has become a bit of a cynic in regards to men and resists involvement with them unless she is in full control. The man she eventually falls in love with tears down her defences without, except superficially, threatening her independence or career.

The genre continues to favour the heroine. We are allowed access to her inner thoughts and frustrations. The man, on the other hand, remains a vague shadow except when he is with her. He develops into a character only through having had contact with the heroine. However, in spite of the attractively modern wrapper, the heroine essentially continues unchanged: she is and feels incomplete until the man enters her life; he redefines her existence and gives it real meaning; it is he who drives her to do her best and achieve excellence. This, however unpalatable, does not detract from the genre's appeal. Like the skeletal plot, its familiarity numbs the jar.

The success of **Shades of Love** in translating the romance novel to film is dependent on its ability to make available to the viewer the opportunity to participate in the creation of the romance and to be privy to the heroine's inner thoughts.

Shades of Love's attempt to capture the spirit of the romance novel is a wonderful success in **Champagne for Two** and a dismal failure in **Sincerely, Violet. Champagne for Two** is a light, intimate and humourous look at what happens to the life of Cody Prescott (Kirsten Bishop), a young architect-engineer, when she agrees to share her apartment with an unexpected house-guest (Nicholas Campbell). **Champagne for Two** discloses the romance that develops between Cody and her house-guest from the heroine's perspective. The man plays a secondary role to the woman's vulnerabilities, fears and feelings which are made available to the viewer via her confidences to her friend Mollie (Carol Ann Francis). Having been allowed entry into the heroine's psyche and having been given the opportunity to fill in the 'falling-in-love' scenes, the viewer sympathises with the heroine when the relationship breaks down and is happy for her when she is reunited with the man she loves.

Lewis Furey succeeds in translating the veiled and vague quality of the genre's language to that of film. He appears to know that the romance novel's language is, first and foremost, a language of sensation that must be interpreted and not taken too literally. It is flesh to its familiar, skeletal plot. It foreshadows the plot and is suggestive of the sensations the reader should vicariously feel as the heroine falls in love. Lewis transmutes the foreshadowing language of the novel by using its film equivalent — the visual cliché. For example, at the beginning of the film, while Cody is taking a shower, Vince enters the apartment without her being aware of it. Shots of her in the shower are juxtaposed with shots of Vince's gloved hand opening the apartment door. She soaps herself and Vince (unidentified as yet) takes out several knives from the kitchen drawer. She rinses herself and he revs the electric knife. She dries herself and he throws a piece of meat to his dog.

Furey elicits certain audience expectations of the plot which he then humouously undercuts. At the same time, and in the tradition of the suspense/ horror film, he prompts the viewers to participate in the filling in of things only hinted at by the shots and allowing their imaginations to take over.

Sincerely, Violet fails to capture the spirit of the romance novel. It is difficult to believe that Elizabeth (Patricia Phillips) — a shy retiring history professor with a basso profundo, furniture-stroking second self, Violet — and the man we are told she is in love with (Simon MacCorkingdale) are actually in love. There is a complete absence of intimacy between them. This may be because Elizabeth enters Mark's life fraudulently as Violet (an identity made up by her friend when Elizabeth is caught trying to steal a letter from Mark's study), disap-

• Nicholas Campbell and Kristen Bishop do it, romantically, in **Champagne for Two**

pears from it because she is afraid he's falling in love with her Violet alter-ego and not her 'true' self, and reenters his life as Elizabeth. They only sleep together because Elizabeth reminds Mark of Violet. This is romance?

Ignorant of the purpose of the genre's language, Mort Ranson makes the mistake of taking it too literally. In one scene the cliché of a couple dancing to their own song, oblivious to the world around them, is presented word for word, to the viewer as Elizabeth/ Violet and Mark dancing to a slow song while the other people on the dance floor move spastically to an inaudible disco tune.

Unlike **Champagne for Two**, which gives us access to the heroine's inner thoughts, **Sincerely, Violet** effectively locks us out. Elizabeth is too busy writing a book and would rather not share her thoughts if it means falling behind schedule. However, even if **Sincerely, Violet** had given us the opportunity to know the heroine's thoughts and feelings, it is doubtful that any identification with Elizabeth would have been possible. Elizabeth is depicted as the retiring and shy history professor in some scenes and a sensual, femme-fatale in others. The two aspects of Elizabeth/ Violet are never reconciled into a whole and complete individual. It is as though the film takes as truth the Madonna/whore myth that a woman can't be both intelligent and seductive. She must either be an Elizabeth or a Violet. This depiction of a dichotomized woman will be insulting to many of the female viewers who see themselves neither as pasteurized maidens nor as irresistable vamps.

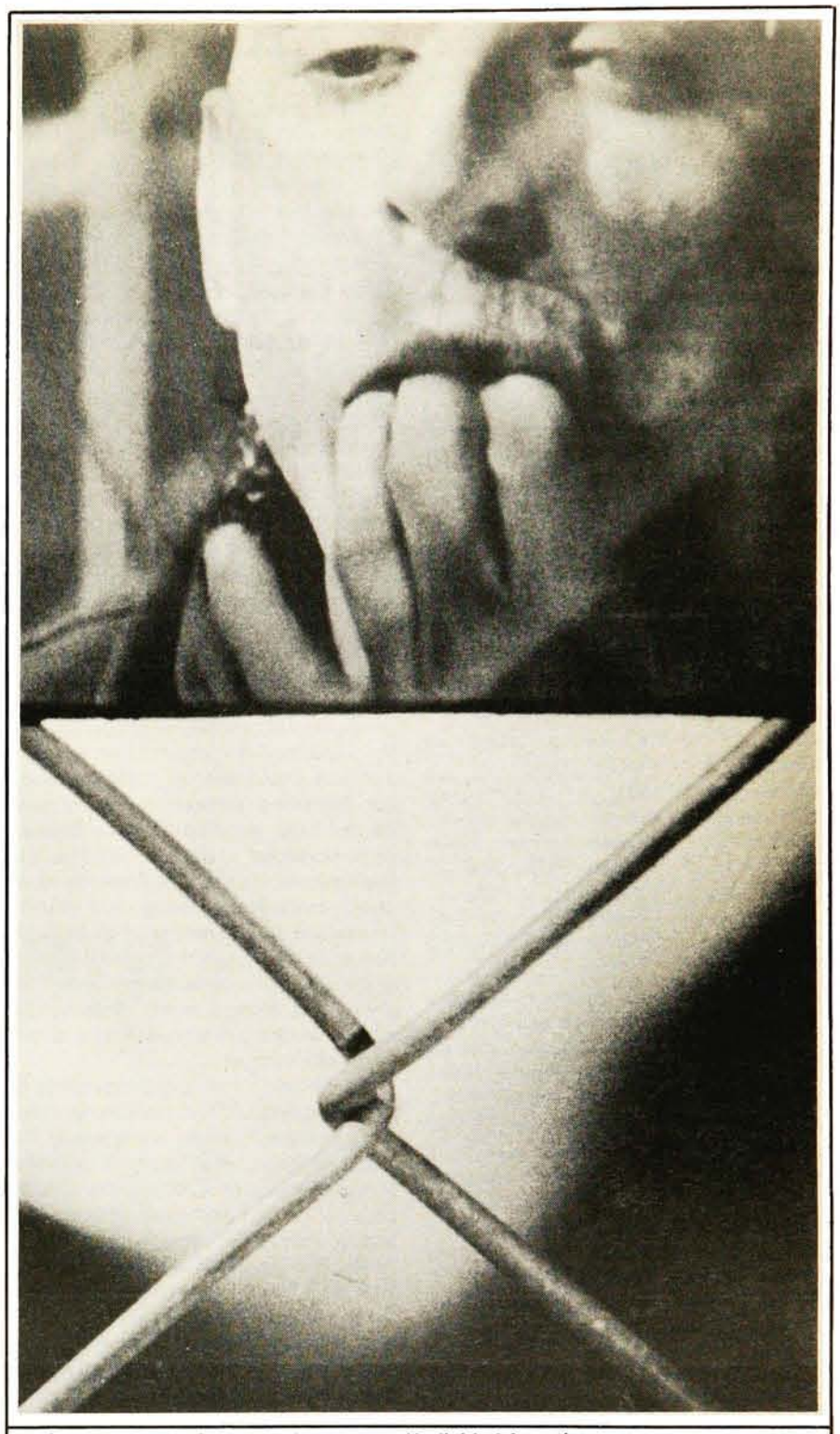
If **Shades of Love** doesn't undermine the intelligence of its predominantly female viewer, as it does in **Sincerely, Violet,** it will be an incredibly successful series. Few can resist a warm invitation to fall in love, at regular intervals, in the privacy of one's home. And without having to worry if this time is for 'real'. As **Champagne for Two** proves, when the romance novel is interpreted correctly, it will be.

Ana Arroyo •

exec. p. Ken Atchity **p.** Stewart Harding **d.** Lewis Furey (*Champagne for Two*), Mort Ransen (*Sincerely, Violet*) **d.o.p.** René Verzier **prod. design.** Michael Joy **prod. sup.** Marilyn Majerczuk **prod. man.** Pierre Laberge **art d.** Lynn Trout **cost. design.** Lyse Bédard **sd.** Henri Bilondeau **post prod. sup.** Peter Alves **1st a.d.** *Champagne for Two* — François Leclerc. *Sincerely, Violet* — Frank Ross **2nd a.d.** Tom Groszman **3rd a.d.** Vicki Frodsham **unit man.** Ken Korrall **loc. man.** Carole Mondello, Marie Potvin **prod. co-ord** Deborah Day **asst. to Steart Harding** Linda Nadler **Asst. to Ken Atchity** Tracy Lotwin **asst. to Michael Joy** Françoise St. Aubin **asst. to John Meighan** Skip Hobbs **prod. acct.** Peter Sowden, Tina Kontos **typist/ reception** Jean Sexton **asst. cam.** Denis Gingras **2nd. asst. cam.** Jean-Jacques Gervais **cont** *Champagne for Two* Sandrine Fayos. *Sincerely, Violet* — Suzanne Chiasson **set dec.** *Champagne for Two* Guy Lalonde **asst. by.** Richard Tassé *Sincerely, Violet* André Chamberland **asst. by** Mario Hervieux **prop. mast.** Marc Corriveau **props.** Marc de Léry, Anne Grandbois **asst. cost. des.** Ellen Garvie **set ward.** Francesca Chamberland **asst. set ward.** Marie-Thérèse Brouillard **asst. unit man.** Karl Archambault **pix vehicle co-ord** Roman Martyn **make-up** Colleen Quinton **hair** *Champagne for Two* Serge Morache *Sincerely, Violet* Ben Robin **swing gang** Glendon Light, Denis Lemire, Eric Brunet, Stephane Connolly, Ross Schore **gaffer** Jean-Marc Hébert **best boy** René Guillard **1st elec.** Sylvain Bernier **2nd. elec.** Bernard Arseneau **geni op.** Michel Canuel **key grip** François Dupéré **grip** Robert Baylis **boom** Pierre Blain **art. dept. driver** Mary Lunn Beachman **office driver** Jimmy Kontos, Eddy Fisher **driver** Tim Parkinson **craft serv.** Jean Lalonde **honeywagon** Gerardo Monzi **casting agent** Nadia Rona, Elite **post prod.** Peter Alves **pub. relations**, Shona French, David Novek Associates **l.p.***Champagne for Tur.* Nicholas Campbell, Kirsten Bishop, Carol-Ann Francis, Terry Haig, Eve Napier, Russell Yuen. *Sincerely, Violet* Simon MacCarkindale, Patricia Phillips, Barbara Ann Jones.

Chris Gallagher's

Undivided Attention



• character + narrative + emotion + text = **Undivided Attention**

Undivided Attention is a feature-length experimental film by Chris Gallagher which could be seen as part of a trend in Canadian experimental film which has surfaced in the last few years. This trend can be defined as a move away from the purely structuralist inspections of time and space to include elements of character, narrative, emotion and text.

Other films by Gallagher have been fashioned primarily in the structuralist mode, for example, **Atmosphere** (1975) or **Seeing in the Rain** (1981). **Undivided Attention** is essentially a non-linear, narrative construct (with a voice-over text and an original musical score) which uses structuralist devices. Like Godard or Straub, Gallagher relies heavily on a collage technique which uses the film elements like puzzle pieces, that only come together as an emotional and narrative whole in the viewer's mind.

Gallagher's metaphor for narrativity, and construct of the film as journey, is a recurring shot of a man and woman in a small sports car travelling through various rural and urban landscapes. We always see the couple from the back of the car where the camera has been placed and travel with them, in what seems to be a cross-country journey, through a series of jumpcuts which destroy the illusion of a continuous time and space.

This emblematic couple is always crossing bridges just as Gallagher's film attempts to bridge the gap between the dichotomies that define his filmmaking and his self. This film seems to be dealing with the split in the postmodern world, between the natural and the civilized, the emotions and the intellect, woman and man, art and theory, sign and meaning, and what we see and what we know. These splits are imaged through a collage which becomes a three-way relationship between perceptual disorientation, an ambiguous conceptual relation to the world, and the problematics of male-female relationships.

The recurrence of perceptual, cinematic games is the most noticeable feature of the film. Asides from the numerous uses of rhythmically edited jumpcuts, we also get many shots which serve to disorient the viewer's relationship to the visual world of the film. One often-used device is that of isolating a part of the frame, usually some sort of symbol (such as a painting, a postcard, or a wheel) and holding it steady while the rest of the frame – a conventional, realistic shot – spins out of control. At the beginning of the film Gallagher does this with a strip which goes horizontally across the center of the frame, showing a picture of a toy boat, while in the background is a shot of a real boat. The real is set spinning but the sign remains in control.

Another type of shot which Gallagher uses to question and distort our sense of space and control of the view, is one where the camera is seemingly directly attached to some object in the frame. In the most spatially disorienting shot of this type, he mounts a camera on a shovel with the shovel blade in the center of the frame. This at first seems to give us a point of reference but as soon as the manipulator of the shovel (maybe the cameraman/filmmaker) starts to shovel, the background space becomes real and yet a virtually unreadable, swirling sea of matter. The central view orients to the shovel but disorients us in space. The background and foreground seem separate realities but become one as the shovel picks up snow. The soundtrack also disorients as the live synchronized sound is intentionally put out of sync, thereby creating a further feeling of a world out of kilter. Gallagher's perceptual games and intentional blurring and undermining of an easy viewing or reading of his work is implicitly a call to pay attention (**Undivided Attention**?) to his mode of construction of a work of art, his style of representation, and his version of a cinematic self.

The previously described shots could be seen as pure structuralist constructs, questioning the relationships between viewer, film and reality. However, Gallagher, in this film, often uses these structuralist devices to put forth an emotional reality. As in a Brakhage film, we share the filmmaker's subjective point-of-view. The narrative line of this film, as disjunctive as it is, does seem to follow the progress of a sexual relationship. The emblematic couple in the recurring car scenes is replaced by other actors in different scenes, but these scenes when strung together do make a poetic and narrative whole. The feelings of disorientation, which the perceptual trickery conveys to the viewer, are not only feelings of disorientation towards the perceptual world, but only towards the conceptual and emotional world.

A scene central to the definition of the male/female relationships in the film is that of a man typing up a shot by shot description of **The Blue Angel** by Von Sternberg, while a part of the film plays on a television set in the background. The scene on the TV is that of Marlene Dietrich in the cabaret singing *Falling in Love Again* while the German professor,

who is soon to become her lover, watches from the audience. The song defines her as a femme fatale, a destructive force who draws men like "moths to a flame". At the same time, in her role as cabaret singer, Dietrich obviously portrays the woman as spectacle, as unattainable other. **The Blue Angel** is about a relationship between a sexual woman and a rigid, over-intellectual professor who is locked in by acceptance of the codes of his society. This could also be seen as a description of the relationship portrayed in the film. The filmmaker/author seems to be struggling with a dichotomy in himself, a conflict between the emotional self and the intellectual self. This scene also contains perceptual-conceptual game-playing: the camera appears to be directly attached to the typewriter and moves across the screen in small jarring motions dictated by the typing, while on each return the shot gets tighter and tighter on the face of the man who is typing. The typing (supposedly of the screenplay of **The Blue Angel** which we hear on the voice-over track) dictates Gallagher's unusual shot by shot breakdown in a literal mechanical sense, just as the voice-over describes the breakdown of the German film playing on the video monitor. The two films are linked in Gallagher's innovative manner, and the audience is cued to look closer for the subtextual connections to his emotional themes.

In another scene, the neon sign of a running horse is juxtaposed with a voice-over narration which recounts the story of Muybridge, the photographer who was a seminal force in the investigation of motion by the use of several still camera images. Muybridge can be seen as trying to pin down a natural phenomenon through intellectual means, but in the end we learn that he was put on trial for the murder of his wife's lover and even though he was acquitted the suspicion remains that he was incapable of controlling his own nature.

In this respect the filmmaker's handling of the scene where the couple make love is one of the most interesting for its many reverberations of meaning. The scene starts with an overhead shot of Niagara Falls, as the camera pulls back it reveals a woman reading a book held over the falls. The voice-over is a doubled voice, male and female, reciting these words; "I look into his eyes and he looks back. Who are you and what do you mean?" There are more shots of the falls and as the camera goes into a close-up of the rushing water, we hear the sound of a woman's voice during the sexual act. The speed of the rushing water is manipulated (slower & faster) until it becomes an abstract, electronic light play – an apparent linking of the natural and conceptual. Next we see a woman walking over a bridge and then an out-of-focus image of two bodies making love, so abstract as to become almost unrecognizable. The previous doubled-voice-over text is played backwards and eventually a small spotlight appears caressing the bodies and revealing certain parts more clearly and sharply than in the overall image. The spotlight is a very suggestive device, implying the eye of the camera, the peephole gaze of the viewer and the objectification of the bodies. But the shots of the woman walking over the bridge, which are intercut into this scene, do suggest that the dichotomy between male and female, intellectual and natural, can be bridged. In the out-of-focus shots of the two bodies making love, the viewer is not able to clearly define what is happening, but the emotion inherent in two bodies melting into each other is clearly conveyed. Repeatedly Gallagher uses what can only be called an abstract expressionist style of filmmaking, as in the previously described shots, which seem to refer to an alliance between art, nature and the emotions. As in Lacanian psychology, the unity of the self is linked to a pre-language, pre-signification stage of awareness. To emphasize this the sex scenes are followed by shots of a paintbrush merrily dancing over a blank page, to the tattoo beat on a paintcan drum, flowing in red and blue.

It seems to us that in this film, society as a whole is seen as a system of signs which bars the male/filmmaker from the bliss of union with the other, be it woman or nature. Indeed, the beginning of the film is a series of revolving signs for modern day commodities; gas, fried chicken, cigarettes, etc... The ending of the film then becomes a clearer statement of the impossibility of a relationship between men and women. Gallagher presents the intellectually active man, destroying, eating and burying himself in books, imprisoned behind a fence, cut off from the natural woman, presented as the unattainable 'other' in a shot of a female nude, seen upside-down, in the groundglass of a photographer's camera.

There are some problems with the film. **Undivided Attention** is essentially a postmodernist work where Gallagher tries to imbue notions of subjectivity, emotion, and narrativity in a film that on its first and most striking level works mostly as a series of perceptual plays. The question is, how effective is this mix? Are there enough clues to the emotional and psychological meanings? For an unadvised audience, the film could become an enjoyable visual experience but perhaps no more. Several viewings might be needed to decipher the complexity of the work. The overwhelming length of the film can also become a deterrent to its enjoyment and if some of the repetition could be cut out it would make for a tighter and more powerful statement. However, overall **Undivided Attention** is a highly ambitious, complex and successful work.

Don Terry •
Mary Alemany-Galway •

UNDIVIDED ATTENTION **p./w./d./d.o.p.** Chris Gallagher **add. photog.** Georg Ladanyi **sd. rec.** Chris Gallagher **add. sd. rec.** Scott Jacques, Tom Turnbull **ed.** Chris Gallagher **add. sd. cut.** Angelos Hatzitolios **m.** Chris Gallagher **add. m.** Tom Kondzielewski **Persian drum** Orang Nowkhah **pipe band** Victoria park Pipe Band, Regina "Ich Bin Von Kopf Bis Fuss Auf Liebe Eigesteelt", and "Lili Marleen" sung by Marlena Dietrich **voice over** Dawn Kasdorf, R.J.W. Swales, John Turek, Michelle Turek **Thanks to the following for their assistance** Harald Berwald, Peg Campbell, Michael Decourcy, Spyro Egarhos, Wren Jackson, Barrie jones, Se Kohane, Marc Lafoy, Peter Lipskis, Nancy More, Susan Roth, Wayne Selby, Somkiat Vithuranich, Randy Zimmer, Elizabeth Zmetana, The University of Regina — Department of Film and Video **lab.** Alpha Cine **financial assistance** Canada Council Film Production Section **l.p.** Barrie Jones, Merika Talve, Chris Gallagher, Wren Jackson, Georg Ladanyi, Wren Jackson, Alan Brandoli, Tomasz Pbpg-Malinowski, Al Egum, The 15th Field Artillery Regiment, RCA, Roy Cross, Dana TAffelmeyer, Spyro Egarhos, Carlyn Swartz, Georg Ladanyi, Lisa Daum, Don Hall.

Kay Armatage's

Artist on Fire

The first thing you see in Kay Armatage's **Artist on Fire** is a joke. Joyce Wieland – avant-garde filmmaker, Canada's officially-sanctioned radical woman artist, our Joyce – sits in a stuffed chair putting the finishing touches on a portrait of a young man in ancient Greek costume. The model stands posed with two other ersatz Olympians before a background of rich draperies, soft lighting and still-life. The whole thing sends up the genteel male tradition of salon painting – its stasis, its borrowed mythology, and, most importantly, its exclusion of women artists – in one sharp jab. This documentary about Wieland makes its first point quickly and deftly: the boy's clubhouse is a farce; it just plain looks silly. But our Joyce is in a tricky position because she's just been invited in.

Artist on Fire arrives as Joyce Wieland finds herself being celebrated on several fronts as "Canada's foremost woman artist." After decades of working on the fringes of recognition, working in a variety of media, working with and against traditional notions of women's work and women's art, Wieland has come in from the margins (or the centre has expanded to meet her). Her work is currently the subject of a major Art Gallery of Ontario retrospective, and both the popular and the art press have been writing about her lately with unprecedented interest and urgency. **Artist on Fire** arrives at the same time as all of this, but it stands to one side of it.

Armatage's film was conceived in 1983, stemming from an initial interest in Wieland's 'formalist/feminist' films of the '60s and '70s, and an amazement at the lack of informed critical writing about them. Both a film scholar and a filmmaker, Armatage makes documentaries that usually approach 'women's' issues – abortion in **Speak Body**, objectification and economy in **Striptease** – from a grounding in theory. **Artist on Fire**, as she saw it, would attempt to place Wieland's films within the larger context of her work – canvases, drawings, sculptures, quilts, etc.; it would demonstrate the richness of (and in) Wieland's work as a whole, and rescue her films from the confining structuralist designation. Traditionally, films such as **Reason Over Passion**, **Handtinting**, and **A and B in Ontario** have been looked at (when they were looked at at all) as experiments with the medium, formal play. **Artist on Fire** views them in the context of Wieland's personal concerns: feminism, the environment, the Canadian political and geographical body, eroticism, to name some.

The film works by intercutting interviews with Wieland – she addresses the camera directly – with examples of her work, scenes of her at work, and staged scenes which 'quote' her work. We see Wieland swimming in a lake, reprising a scene from her feature film **The Far Shore**. We see Wieland aiming a handheld camera at the camera, quoting **A and B in Ontario**. Armatage's technique is to blend her text with Wieland's texts, insinuating commentary into art. She's able to do this partly by not identifying shots from Wieland's films when they appear. They simply form a part of the text, given no more weight than Armatage's own images. In fact, the film's editing style insists on erasing the lines between what is secondary and what is primary material, on knitting a seamless join between Wieland's life (or performed life) and her art: associative cuts may take the viewer from an object in Wieland's home to a similar object in a film of hers, to a canvas, to a new sequence. This is not a distanced, 'objective' documentary; Armatage has called it an ode.

Or perhaps a chorus. Armatage's use of voice in **Artist on Fire** is characteristic of her work. She blends the commentaries of Denis Reid, Joyce Zemans, Judy Steed and Michael Snow, which include both personal and critical statements, into a polyvalent voice, speaking *around* Wieland and her work, overlapping and intersecting one another, working by addition to fill in the picture. Armatage has used this strategy before, most effectively in **Speak Body**, where the common personal experience of the women and the emotional resonance of the subject combined to give the voices an irresistible rhetorical force.

The effect isn't as strong here, but the voices do convince, and that causes some problems. Interweaving voices would seem to solve the problem of the 'authority' of the traditional documenta-

• Joyce Wieland gets ready for the jab

ry voice-over, but whether or not they diffuse the sight of knowledge within the film, the cumulative effect of voices speaking in complement is still authority, perhaps even more authority, because the voices cover more ground. And as in **Speak Body**, they ***are*** just voices; it is not until the end of the film that they are identified. By not identifying them Armatage avoids the specificity that would allow the viewer to place and evaluate what the voices say. As it is, we are forced to accept their words unquestioningly: they have the power of anonymity; they have authority.

But the film never claims to be a cold-eyed appraisal of Wieland's art; it intends to persuade. It echoes the excess that characterizes Wieland's most powerful work with a little purposeful obsessiveness of its own. You don't need to be familiar with theories of the body, or excess, or feminist discursive practice to appreciate **Artist on Fire**, but it is another way into the film. Armatage works with an awareness of current theoretical discussions of physicality and expression, and that knowledge lies behind her approach to Wieland. In its use of colour, and in its unwillingness to be 'proper', the film follows Wieland's sensuous, vivid canvases. Armatage is gifted with an eye for composition that many 'objective' documentary filmmakers lack; she has Wieland's talent for producing erotic, tactile images, and she does it in the same way: by paying close attention to the detail of a thing, by waiting.

In a sequence near the end of the film, she records Wieland and a friend making a peach pie: the camera roves over the kitchen table (looking like a Flemish painting with refreshingly playful sexual symbols scattered here and there) luxuriating in rich colours and sheer ***moistness***. All the while Wieland and friend chat about art over the soundtrack for the sequence, a Lester Bowie instrumental version of "Blueberry Hill" But the critical commentary does not stop: the sequence is intercut with examples of Wieland's erotic art, and the voices' discussion of its place in her work. The dominant element in the sequence, though, is pleasure. So is Armatage working within a 'libidinal economy' here, or is she just having fun?

Artist on Fire is a response to Joyce Wieland – to what she means to Canadian artists, to Canadian women artists, to Kay Armatage. It's not the film one might envisage Wieland making about herself (it's not nearly relentless enough, for one thing), but it goes one better: it is a strong, original engagement with Wieland's work that meets the challenge of its subject. And it does it with wit.

Cameron Bailey •

d. Kay Armatage **p**. Barbara Tranter **cam**. Babette Mangolte, Peter Mettler **sd**. Aerlynn Weissman **film ed**. Petra Valier **sd. ed**. Michelle Moses **mixer** George Novotny **music** O Yuki Conjugate, Jon Hassell, Steven Reich, Alexina Louey, Germaine Tailleferre, Marcelle Deschenes, Harry Freidman, Amadeus Mozart, Lester Bowie **p.c**. Dominion Pictures **colour** 16mm **running time**: 54 min.