

bill fruet

# 2 or 3 things...

by  
Piers Handling

Bill Fruet is not only a Canadian survivor, he prospers. Many were aghast when he turned from 'art' to 'horror' as he entered the commercial arena with *Death Weekend*. Piers Handling examines that film and Fruet's previous ones – those he directed and those he scripted – to discover the ideas common in all his works.

Jeannie, repressed and distant, in *Wedding in White*



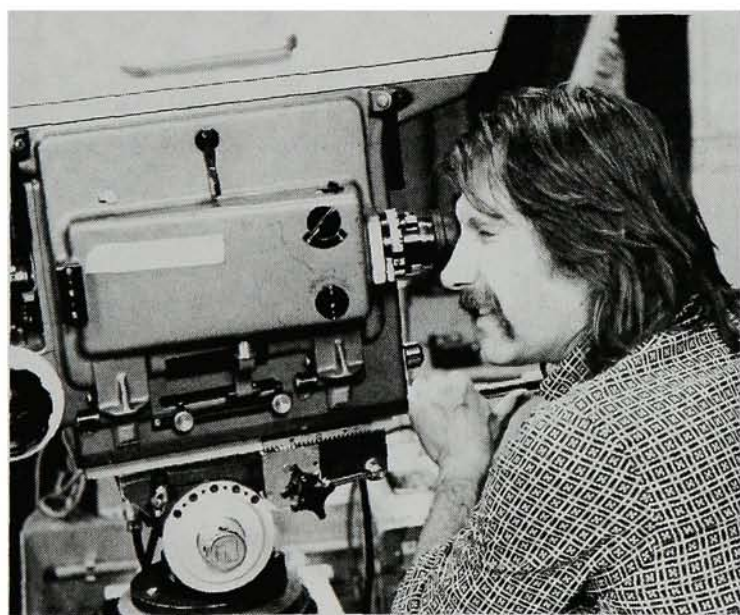
"These women and the way they felt, and that whole drinking mentality, made such an impression on me. And I have no use for this kind of existence, I detested it all, even back then."

—Bill Fruet interviewed by George Csaba Koller on **Wedding in White**. Cinema Canada no 3 p. 45.

Bill Fruet has been associated with success. His total output has been numerically small — three features as scriptwriter, two as director — yet of these five no less than **three** were honored as best feature film at the Canadian Film Awards — no mean achievement. His script for **Goin' Down the Road** broke much new territory and, combined with Shebib's fine direction, elevated the film to what must surely rank as a milestone in the development of an indigenous English Canadian feature film industry. His first effort as a director, for which he also wrote the script, achieved a critical success for Fruet that again suggested another step forward for our fledgling industry. A warm Cannes reception combined with a prestigious New York opening convinced many foreign critics that **Wedding in White** was evidence of a new-found maturity in our cinema. Then, everything Fruet touched seemed to turn to gold. His next script grew into **Slipstream** which won another best film award, and finally his latest, **Death Weekend** is a run-away commercial hit — about \$800,000 in advance sales at Cannes alone in 1976.

Apart from all these outward signs of success, Fruet is interesting in other ways. Indeed, it is perhaps not going too far to say that he will be a key figure in an understanding of our present-day cinema. Alone of all our contemporary English-language filmmakers, Fruet is an *auteur* — an author in the true sense of the word, responsible for both writing and directing his work. While the three scripts which he did not direct (**Goin' Down the Road**, **Rip-Off** and **Slipstream**) were refracted through another sensibility, it is possible to discern attitudes and ideas which were confirmed in **Wedding in White** and **Death Weekend**. This article has largely been motivated by seeing these two latter films at almost the same time, both eliciting similar responses which I'll confess at the outset, a certain degree of anger and hostility. Using this as a point of departure I want to touch on certain facets of Fruet's work that I find revealing.

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Bill Fruet filming **Wedding**

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All of Fruet's work shares common characteristics, more exaggerated in certain instances, less visible in others. It is unified by a similar attitude to the people of his films, how they interrelate and what kinds of situations Fruet takes them through. The scripted work reveals characters and relationships not radically different from the two directed pieces. Robert Fothergill in his excellent article on the Canadian male, **Being Canadian Means Always Having to Say You're Sorry**, touches upon many feelings and impressions discernible in Fruet's work. Paul Bradley and Doug McGrath play similar roles in **Goin' Down the Road** and **Wedding in White** — a couple of beery and convivial buddies out for a good time, more often than not at the expense of others. But in the latter film they exist too dangerously as one-dimensional figures, a parody of the soldier-on-leave who just wants a woman and a drink. The four teenage boys in **Rip-Off** ceaselessly cook-up elaborate schemes designed to impress a group of young girls, but each plan ends in failure and rejection until finally they stumble across the magic formula. Their continual attempts at a pick-up strike a responsive note when one thinks of Harry in **Death Weekend** who similarly has little else on his mind. But whereas **Rip-Off** is at least an honest effort to come to grips with a milieu and an attitude common to that time, little is done to understand Harry.

However it is Fruet's depiction of women in these films that is highly revealing. In **Goin' Down the Road**, **Rip-Off** and **Slipstream** they are viewed as disruptive forces that come between men and deflect them from their chosen path in life. The two Shebib films share a common posture towards their women, either portraying them as silly, flighty broads with curlers in their hair, interested in little more than marriage, or as remote and distant fantasies, fundamentally inaccessible, expressions of a lifestyle that is beyond the reach of the men that are attracted to them. Betts and Celina, the women that Joey and Pete can get, are contrasted to the sexy secretary in the bottle plant and the girl in the record store, in **Goin' Down the Road**. In **Rip-Off**, Susan is a classic portrait of the Lolita like bitch-goddess, hard, calculating, and cold, but of course beautiful. When our protagonist finally beds her, after dreaming up elaborate schemes to impress, her attention span lasts no longer than the physical act. What becomes objectionable in **Rip-Off** apart from the characterization of Susan is the fact that it remains so unbalanced throughout the film. Girls become little more than accessories — to have and to hold, but not to cherish. Getting one means putting on an act of some sort, or doing something different.

**Slipstream** at least sees some evolution, having a heterosexual relationship at the centre of its structure (regardless of how unsatisfactory it may be in its portrayal). But Kathy is always seen as an interloper, as somebody who has invaded Mike Mallard's privacy. She initially inserts herself into his life as one of a truck-load of hippies, and tries to domesticate him. Then she becomes associated with another force who is also seen as restricting Mallard's freedom; his radio producer expects him to play certain music to keep the record companies happy. That Mallard is forced to change, indeed perhaps sees the need himself, is communicated to us almost entirely in terms of loss. But there is much of interest in this film in light of what preceded it — a growing exploration of the demands that a full and committed relationship places upon people, and a realization that one's parameters of freedom are more tenuous than imagined. That Kathy is viewed as a threat is natural, given Fruet's concerns, but at least she is human.

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Consider two moments in Fruet's films — one that achieves its force verbally, the other visually. Both evidence

a certain tone that is imparted to each film, a tone that I want to explore. It is about the mid-way point of **Wedding in White**. Jeannie is struggling with the distinct possibility that Billy's brutal rape has left her pregnant. Her mother and father, in company with their friends Sarah and Sandy, have just returned home after Jim's commemorative dinner. The two men disappear into the basement to merrily drink on, leaving their womenfolk upstairs to share a pot of tea. Sarah and Mary decry the fact that their men have to push their drinking to such senseless limits. "Now my husband was a real gentleman" the widowed Sarah declares, before leaving to catch the last bus. Alone in the dining room, it's late and subdued. A type of tiredness has settled on the scene and Jeannie asks her mother why Sarah walks with a limp. Her 'gentleman' of a husband badly beat her up one night, her mother tells her, but "poor Sarah, she doesn't remember a thing."

The scene in **Death Weekend** works in a different way. Our apparently suave dentist has asked a young, attractive model out to his country house for the weekend. Only one in a long line of such dates, Diane has been lured out to his estate under the assumption that there is going to be a weekend party. Harry of course has only one thing on his mind - Diane and bed. After introducing her to his impressive dwelling, Diane is shown to her bedroom where, alone, she begins to unpack her clothes. Suddenly we become aware that Harry is watching her through a one-way mirror, specially constructed for such a purpose. Undressing, Diane moves into the bathroom to shower, oblivious that Harry is only inches away from her and can see her every movement. Gloating over his imagined forthcoming conquest, and savouring her nakedness, Harry produces a camera and proceeds to photograph her. After a few exposures he noiselessly slips out of his secret compartment.

Extracted in isolation these scenes are harmless. In the context of each film they are devastating. If the total effect of almost all of **Wedding in White** is to strip away our illusions of life, a movement closely matched with what Jeannie herself is undergoing, Fruet allows us no relief from his relentless and unforgiving stare. Although the film is full of very human moments, skilfully written and delicately presented, paradoxically it is also curiously devoid of humanity. If every character in the film is revealed as selfish, cruel or hypocritical (and this is where the scene with Sarah is so important) then what do we have to hold this up against? Nothing in fact. There is no one we can hold onto as an audience, no one who is different, no one who rebels. As an audience we are forced towards Jeannie. Yet there is a curious void at the centre of this film and eventually one comes to the conclusion that it resides in Jeannie's characterization. We never really come close to her. She is relatively without energy, almost apathetic in accepting her fate. In fact, she shows real excitement only when her father brings home her wedding dress. This lack of energy, combined with the intensity of what we are being shown, creates a feeling of incredible repression that is felt as belonging to events within the film, but which is communicated to the audience. It is an energy that we want to discharge - we want a release! Beyond a point, it is useless to subject an audience to any more battering, and within the dramatic framework of his film, Fruet has lost something at the same time. Without a moment of optimism, a single breath of fresh air, every new element of the grotesque that he introduces into the drama loses its impact. But this ceaseless layering of levels of despair, repression and hypocrisy seems to point towards an attitude that Fruet must feel towards his characters. If the final sentiment imparted by the film is of the characters as a series of rigorously manipulated puppets, there is also a sense of condescension that verges on hatred.

Harry lewdly eying Diane showering as he photographs her reinforces responses that I felt while watching **Wedding in White**. The shower scene does not really surprise one, nor is it out of character. We feel that we have a good grip on Harry as a person. He's just interested in 'getting it off' with Diane. She'll be a nice lay as he's already said to the two country bumpkins who act as informal guards to his country mansion. So we have already become used to Harry treating people as objects, as casual conquests. His home has been decorated with only one thing in mind - to impress. Diane is just another piece of the furniture, similar to the grand piano that he has but cannot play. But his private shower session is important in defining Harry in relation to the loutish band of misfits who reek terror on his weekend. His kinky sexual needs differ little from Lep's, who is unable to rape Diane unless she fights back; or indeed Runt, who, given Diane, orders her to put on all kinds of make-up, before gently cutting her on the neck with his straight razor, as a type of foreplay to sex. The sexual kinkiness closely identifies Harry with the four thugs, and when he is killed we feel no remorse. Diane's horror is certainly not our own. By disposing of Harry so early, Fruet loses any chance he has to perhaps change the character in interesting ways (as Peckinpah did with the Dustin Hoffman figure in **Straw Dogs**).

A razor-cut as foreplay in **Death Weekend**



If the scene with Sarah is representative of the excess of **Wedding in White**, that with Harry in **Death Weekend** is also damning and limiting. If Harry is in reality no different than Lep and his gang then no one is to be trusted *at all* in this film (which is similar to the situation in **Wedding in White**). Everyone is involved in a hideous mire of connected guilt, where degrees of morality become meaningless. Fruet's highly negative attitude towards people is more exaggerated in **Death Weekend** than in his other works. The demands of the action genre no doubt explain away parts of this – sketchy characterizations prone to caricature combined with a less subtle coloring of events and psychological development. But is **Death Weekend** really a departure for Fruet? Is it that different from his other work? One might hastily rush towards an affirmative answer. While **Wedding in White** strikes one immediately as serious artwork, **Death Weekend** is obviously aimed towards a commercial market and is markedly different from the intimate elegance of its predecessor. However it is my contention that the two films do share a great deal in common.

The scripted projects all exude a certain warmth. We are moved as an audience by the predicament of the characters, express sympathy for their shortcomings and failed dreams. Yet **Wedding in White** and **Death Weekend** have strong currents of coldness in them, are devoid of compassion or present highly distorted images of life. As if conscious of his limitations in dealing with women, both Fruet's features deal with the female in a far more rigorous manner. But elements of machismo dominate. If we have already seen the roots of Dolly in the portrayal of Susan in **Rip-Off**, here she plays a more important role. Women in **Wedding in White** are either docile like Jeannie, her mother and Sarah, and move in fear of their men, who are treated as 'others' (in the same way that the men are never really comfortable with their women); or are prick-teasers like Dolly, brash, loud, physically assertive and verbally cruel but definitely "no hands below the belt." It is important that it is Dolly's ceaseless taunting of Billy which tragically ends in his releasing his frustrations by raping Jeannie. Men are brutes, but look who eggs them on to it. Everyone, except Jeannie, the victim, is morally stripped in front of us, revealing their cruelty and inhumanity at some point in the film. Those who seem more aware, or more kindly than the others all have their moments of ugliness. Jeannie's mother is allowed a wordless moment of judgment at the wedding reception when she realizes that she has been privy to a gross and indecent travesty of justice. The groom, a kindly sort who has no real faults apart from his perpetual state of intoxication, is ultimately enmeshed in this web of complicity. In the film's final sequence, he drunkenly but gently consoles his distraught, sobbing bride who is huddling in a corner of the room. "Ah, what's the matter. There's no need to be afraid of Sandy." Moving towards the stairs which he realises he can't negotiate by himself, he eventually persuades Jeannie to give him a helping hand. This moment of guarded tenderness is destroyed, however, when Sandy, now successfully at the top of the stairs, coarsely grabs his child-bride before gleefully shoving her into the bedroom. The camera remains discreetly mounted at the bottom of the stairs; one only hears the squeaking of the bedsprings.

**Death Weekend** shares frighteningly similar characteristics with its predecessor. In crudest terms, we find in both films rape, a group of drunken men who terrorize women, and women as victims of men's mental frustrations and sexual needs. Diane fights back, as Jeannie never did. Paradoxically it is *she* who is really responsible for the holocaust of violence precisely by doing this. Her aggressive 'masculine' driving is skillful enough to push Lep and his gang off the road at the beginning of the film. It is her abili-



The beery two-some, home from the army, in **Wedding in White**

ty to think like a man that not only gets her into the whole mess in the first place, but is also responsible for getting her out of it. In some grotesque exchange of roles, Harry becomes passive, protecting his furniture and home, assuming a 'female' role, while Diane becomes more and more aggressive. Even Lep unconsciously recognizes this and the real struggle in the film is between him and her. When Diane stops struggling during the rape, he cannot go on. As soon as she assumes the passive 'female' role, it is no longer arousing for him. Diane's vengeance is totally ruthless, much as we assume Lep's would be. This confusion of roles adds an interesting dimension to the film, particularly in light of Fruet's presentation of the sexes in his other films. One is almost tempted to add that the central importance given to Diane as a woman is almost grafted on the film in some respects, for in important ways she is not even a female in Fruet's eyes.

Beyond the core of these films, Fruet has also adopted a dangerously condescending attitude towards his minor characters, in most cases men. I'm thinking of the two soldiers who try and pick up Dolly and Jeannie, following them into a café to entertain them with impersonations of famous personalities. Or the two yokels with whom Harry leaves his car, a couple of friends who, weekend after weekend, share the visual delights of the women that Harry brings with him. Perpetually drunk, their comic foray up the river to check on Harry and Diane ends in their callous deaths at the hands of two of Lep's gang, driving Harry's super power-boat. The films are full of such moments, when more often than not a drunken stupor has settled across some character.

It has not been my intention to damn Fruet or his films, only to explore my ambivalence towards them, an ambivalence caused by an ugly streak in the films. That Fruet has the right to an artistic vision of unmitigated bleakness, full of the darkness of human nature is one thing; but that this is the only facet of life found in his films is limited and unrealistic. Sadly, one must tentatively suggest that the warmth and understanding found in the scripted works is perhaps not entirely Fruet's.

The final shot in **Death Weekend**, Diane stepping out of the jeep after having won her duel with Lep only confirms much of what I feel about Fruet and this film in particular. The use of slow-motion encourages us to reflect on what this carnage has all meant, and how it had effected Diane. But it is used gratuitously, having little more than a dream-like quality to it. What is this shot meant to communicate – relief and exhilaration, or horror, shock and despair? I certainly don't know and I don't think Fruet does either. □