

REVIEWS

Distinct Cinematic Voices

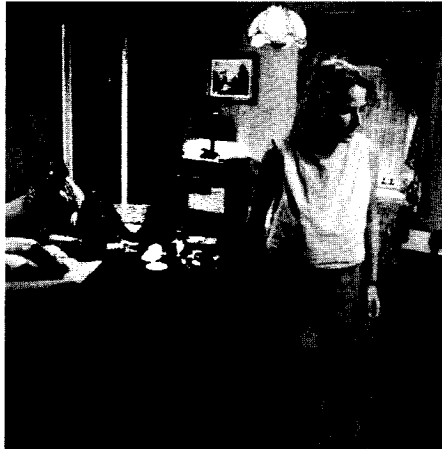
Three Premières
Winnipeg Film Group
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REVIEW BY K. GEORGE GODWIN

The three films unveiled at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque in March exhibit three very different approaches to filmmaking: impressionistic non-narrative; dramatized documentary; and traditional narrative. In an invigorating way, they reaffirm the variety of means available to the filmmaker to explore social and psychological questions.

Darrell Varga's *Messages* is a tone poem which plays on disparities, incongruities, conflicts between image and sound. There are no characters in the traditional sense. The film focusses on a woman who remains silent within the diegesis. There are repeated images of her alone with nature (washing in a river, caressing flowers, walking through a desert); but often technology impinges on these idyllic scenes (a train passing in the background, a drain flowing into the river). In tandem with her aloneness in the natural world is her isolation in the human world: walking through crowded streets, walking beside train tracks which recede into the distance; most particularly, living in a room whose walls are translucent, through which we see the silhouette of the man who lives there but remains separate. She composes messages (writing on sheets of paper which she drops into the river to be carried away) and watches the man on a silent video monitor, but always remains alone except for a brief interlude, a picnic with him beside the river.

While these images establish a city dweller's sense of isolation and her longing



Donna Lewis (left) as Dory, Roscoe Handford as Robin in John Kozak's *Dory*, photograph: Michael Raine

to commune with the natural world, to feel connected, the sound-track is a non-stop assault of "messages," pre-formed cultural signals drawn from old movies and supermarket tabloids. We hear the prescribed forms of emotional expression given by Hollywood films, and they create a tension between the visually expressed but silent needs of the city dweller and the endlessly spoken directions from outside telling us what we should do about those needs. The disparity between these messages and actual experience is intensified by the film's striking photography (by Michael Drabot) which creates rich, strange and often ambiguous images that do not permit pat interpretations.

John Paskievich's *The Actor* is an amusing documentary portrait of a would-be actor who for 12 years has been doing a "temporary job" as a baby's photographer. Ken D'Cruz, an immigrant from India, has little luck as an actor, but seems to be very successful and popular in his temporary role. The film is leisurely, filled with touches of visual humour, some of them oddly disconnected from the story at hand, others stemming from it: D'Cruz's

decaying car, his technique for cleaning sneakers, the photo sessions themselves.

Out of these details, the film's real strength, a number of ironies arise, the first being the reason given for D'Cruz's lack of a theatrical career (he was told there were few roles for a man of his colour). Yet, in this society which has little use for coloured actors, this man is welcomed into a wide array of homes, treated virtually as a friend and allowed to handle the smallest of white babies as he poses them. The film subtly points up the disparity between our society as lived and as it is presented back to itself by the arts and media. There are other, smaller ironies: in his job D'Cruz is necessarily an actor, a performer, as he entertains and guides the children through their individual little photo-lays. But more, he has also become the audience to the performances of others' lives, the recorder of their passages; the film lingers as much on the parents and relatives and their social milieux as it does on the work D'Cruz is doing.

Yet how much of this is actual "document," how much a construct of the filmmaker? Many scenes are quite obviously staged, not simply in the sense of being played to the camera. Paskievich uses narrative film techniques such as the shot-reverse shot construction to convey a conversation (i.e. the various elements of the conversation were filmed at different times and constructed into the visible action only in the editing). More, towards the end of the film, he even enters D'Cruz's head to convey his dream of performing Shakespeare, a dream interrupted by the crying of a child heard through an open window. Here, the film obviously slips into that troubled area known as "docudrama." *The Actor* has charm, it has things to say about social relations and self-perception, but one is left wondering whether those things were found in the life of a man named Ken D'Cruz or were

rather conceived in the mind of John Paskievich and then performed by an actor named Ken D'Cruz.

John Kozak, perhaps more than any other filmmaker working in Winnipeg today, adheres most consistently to what is considered the classical narrative style of filmmaking, the forms generally perfected

Hitchcockian story of murder and guilt. Although the results are ultimately not entirely successful, the film does work well through most of its one-hour running time.

The action occurs in real time on a hot summer night in a remote farmhouse. We gradually learn that Dory has been

seems erratic, almost unstable, as she shifts from quiet tension, through irritability, to outbursts of temper. She is oppressive, stifling her sister, and it seems that much of Dory's behaviour is actually a reaction to being treated as an unreliable child. This makes Robin perhaps the more interesting character and Handford's performance consequently dominates the film; the camera is drawn to her face repeatedly, catching small shifts in expression which seem to indicate so much more than Dory's sneers, tongue-sticking-out and sinister scowls.

Where the film falls short is in the resolution. Having established the terms of the sisters' relationship, revealing the long-running antagonisms which have killed any chance of something more positive developing, the film abruptly changes gears for its climax. Although the groundwork for revealing Dory's murder of her infant daughter has been laid, the film abruptly leaves behind the subtleties of verbal conflict and moves into a distinctly clichéd woman-being-stalked-by-knife-wielding-maniac finale. This may seem like a betrayal of the viewer who has been waiting for a more subtle revelation, but more importantly perhaps, it seems to be a betrayal of the characters. It's almost as if, from the very impossibility of resolving their emotional conflicts, Kozak has thrown up his hands and let them slug it out until the police arrive.

Even though the ending disappoints, what has come before reveals Kozak's increasing skill with actors (the awkwardness which characterized a number of the performances in *The Celestial Matter* is nowhere in evidence here); it also reveals Handford's and Lewis's continuing development as performers.

What distinguishes all three of these new films, apart from their high degree of technical proficiency, is the fact that each of them manages to establish a distinct and individual cinematic "voice." Each film is explicitly concerned with the individual and his/her relationships to others. Yet each, by taking a totally different stylistic approach, examines this theme on a level radically different from the others. Taken together, *Messages*, *The Actor* and *Dory* present a cross-section of alienation and interconnection both within our society and within the media by which we represent ourselves. ♦

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Ken D'Cruz in John Paskievich's *The Actor*, photograph: John Paskievich

in Hollywood in the thirties and forties and disseminated around the world as the standard language of narrative filmmaking. He eschews the self-referential approach of Guy Maddin's *Gimli Hospital*, where the film is as much about previous films and the technique of filmmaking as it is about its ostensible subject matter. Instead, Kozak favours narratives which derive from characters and their interactions, with stylistic devices arising from the requirements imposed by the characters' psychology.

As theorists have pointed out at great length, the forms of classical narrative film offer a wide range of choices to the filmmaker. Kozak might be said to be seeking a "serious commercial" cinema far removed from, say, the unredeemably commercial approach of the Markiw brothers (*Mob Story*). In *Dory*, Kozak has attempted a fusion of tense Bergmanesque psycho-drama (two characters under pressure stripping away the layers of pretence which choke their relationship) with a

considered a problem for the family and feels resentment for having been "shut away." Since the death of the two sisters' father, Robin has bought this remote house, isolating Dory and her infant daughter Becky even further. Dory feels imprisoned; Robin feels trapped by what she perceives as her responsibility to watch over her troubled sister. Kozak effectively creates the atmosphere of a pressure cooker building towards an explosion. The feeling of stifling heat is almost palpable (thanks to the photography of Kent Morehead). But much of *Dory's* strength derives from the interplay of the two performers, Donna Lewis as Dory and Roscoe Handford as Robin. The relationship which emerges between them is complex and ambiguous.

While the title focusses attention on Dory and her behaviour indicates definite psychological problems (her childish petulance, her abrupt shifts of attention and overemphasized actions), the film continually questions the character of Robin. She