

## FILM

## Home Is Where the Art Is

by K. George Godwin

In his new film *Quality Time*, Darrell Varga continues to explore the ways in which identity is constructed in a society defined by mass media and popular culture, themes which are central to an earlier video, *Champagne Dreams*, and to his first film, *Messages*, made in 1990. A short two years later he has completed the most elaborate and—at 52 minutes—most fully developed examination of his concerns.

Varga is alone among Winnipeg Film Group filmmakers in his choice of form. While local practitioners as a whole have focussed on narrative and/or parodic comedy and, more recently, a revived interest in documentary, Varga works in “experimental film.” His films begin from ideas which are then elaborated through constructions of image and sound.

The filmmaker says that he has “no desire to work in the tired conventions of linear narrative.” As a result, his film demands strategies and habits different from those we bring to conventional film. This viewing is essential to the film’s project: to expose the habits of passive, things-as-they-are consumption instilled in us by mass media.

The film, then, invites the viewer to observe its stream of images and multi-layered sound-track not as a fixed structure leading from point A to point B, but as a shifting complex open to interpretation. Ironically, this results in foregrounding the viewer’s ingrained desire for narrative—either out of frustration at the film’s refusal to provide this traditional pleasure, or in the viewer’s wilful urge to dig out and construct a narrative from the fragments. I confess that my personal temperament took me down the latter path.

The narrative which emerges from the images remains fairly abstract—a schema delineating the film’s political point of view.

The tone is set by brief opening images illustrating the conventional American family of the ’50s: Mom, Dad, the kids and the TV. These dated photographs have assumed an air of irony with the passage of time. They now stand as designations of reflexive parody. Through them the film signals its intention to present and

simultaneously comment on—to find layers of meaning in its signifiers. This method enriches the film at the same time that it distances the viewer: Varga constructs for us the position of cool, analytical observer.

The viewer is further distanced by the use of almost continuous narration which offers a steady stream of observations and aphorisms in a virtually unmodulated voice. As the voice of memory floating above the images, this narrator drifts in and out of the viewer’s awareness, an element of the sound-track’s ambiance from which we gradually accumulate a detritus of meaning.

The technique is reminiscent of the way in which television functions as an endless stream of “information” pouring over lulled minds. Despite its claims, television is essentially an audio medium, its voice demanding our attention even as the monotony of its sound puts our minds to sleep.

The family, the film tells us, is the locus for the formation of identity within socially constructed relationships. Identity within the mass culture is constructed in a context that is mutually binding for both men and women. Even so, it privileges the man—he is an active explorer, while the

woman serves in the home; man is infantile, woman mothers.

Only by becoming conscious of the ways in which these forces shape identity can choices be made; only by making a choice can these forces become conscious. At the beginning of the film a woman—called “the sister” (Carole O’Brien)—chooses to bring another figure, “the magician” (Rick Match), into the home which she shares with “the brother” (Wayne Watson). Bound to her brother, she serves him while struggling against his confining presence. “To discover the source of my power,” the narrator tells us, “I brought home a stranger.” The magician is a figure of manipulation and illusion, knowledgeable and entertaining, yet nonetheless enslaving. In one sense he is media culture personified. Through his presence—nursing and cleaning him when he will not even touch himself—the sister delineates the dimensions of her relationship with the brother. She comes to understand the power structures that hold her where she is.

When the brother returns from a road trip, during which he photographs the absurd detritus of society (signified by the gigantic statues erected by towns as indicators of their identity and history), the sister is no longer bound to him; consequently, his dependence on her becomes fully apparent. She leaves the home for the outer world; he pursues, pleading. Becoming independent at last, she scuttles the relationship.

Structurally, *Quality Time* implies that liberation from binding mass-cultural ties must come from the oppressed. Specifically, it argues that feminism is a mechanism for shattering a male-dominated system, a system coded into the film’s imagery: the brother’s explorations among the huge statues marking the landscape; the magician’s infantile regression at the foot of vast powerlines; the absurd spectacle of fat middle-aged men driving miniature cars in a Shriners’ parade are all evidence of the system’s operations. The faces of the Shriners are dead serious, they can only free themselves by submitting to this public spectacle, but they still can’t allow themselves to appear to have fun.

Trapped within the confines of media culture, men become childlike and helpless, and as a result they enslave women who must take care of their needs. “I became a mother for my brother,” the narrator says. By consciously working through this pattern, the woman discovers a way out.

And yet, even though the final portion of the film occurs in the natural world, she still remains within the technology of mass culture. Videotape, not words, is the province of memory.

*Quality Time* is visually impressive. The characters are immersed in impressionistically distorted architectural sets, surrounded by machines and the means of electronic reproduction. The range is as wide as popular culture: distorted records, TVs that reflect the characters back to themselves, photographic images of the world outside, icons—cars, garish plaster figures, images of Elvis, the Statue of Liberty, Hitler.

The sound-track complements and acts in counterpoint to the visuals. Ken Gregory, locally famous for his subtle, multi-layered soundscapes, serves the film well. The variety of ambient textures is wide: sound bites suggesting the political presence of the U.S.; energetic music and intricately crafted natural sounds that evoke a sense of space and freedom in the outside world. Gregory modulates the film’s moods and teases layers of meaning from Varga’s beautifully photographed images. The rich sound-track is essential in countering the levelling effect of an almost toneless narration which could, if left to itself, reduce the film to a single unmodulated note. While the three performers are expressive, essentially they remain figures in an intellectual and visual landscape. Their mimed performances are reined in.

Varga’s visual skills—both in photography and editing—are excellent, but his approach to the medium makes *Quality Time* essentially an intellectual experience. Shots signify rather than evoke emotion or humour. This is not inevitable in experimental film; it is the filmmaker’s choice and I respect it. In the context of filmmaking in Manitoba (and particularly at the Film Group), Varga’s work serves as a reminder that there are many ways of approaching film. Filmmakers, like the sister in *Quality Time*, must necessarily make conscious choices about how they will function within their chosen medium. ♦

*K. George Godwin teaches film and brings frequent messages to Border Crossings about that medium.*

*Quality Time, Produced, directed, photographed and edited by Darrell Varga. Written by Varga and David Welham, Winnipeg Film Group. 1992. 52 minutes.*