

New World No Partic Notes on Movie Nationhood in

When the events of the past 12 months are sculpted into history, it's unlikely that 1995 will be remembered as a good one for Canadian movies. Not that it wasn't

a good one—it was—it's just that the combination of an otherwise turbulent headline calendar with the customarily low visibility of the national film product will certainly ensure that, for instance, *Curtis's Charm* isn't the first thing people will call to mind when reflecting on the middle years of the century's final decade.

Consider the competition for the collective memory bank's shrinking space. As I write, the very afternoon that O.J. Simpson has been unsurprisingly acquitted on murder charges, it's a dead cinch the verdict will become one of those seminal Where-Were-You? sorts of events. ("I was writing about

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what a good year it was for Canadian movies for *Take One*. You?") Even within the Dominion, the competition for pop-cult recollection is stiffer than usual. As someone who's always preferred the creative over the journalistic organi-

by Geoff Pevere

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zation of experience—at whatever cost such a preference might incur—the faces which will most likely loom as memory-bytes are not those of Maurice Dean Wint in *Rude*, Helena Bonham Carter in *Margaret's Museum*, or even Tom Scholte in the dark horse winner of the Toronto International Film Festival's \$25,000 Toronto CITY-TV Award, Bruce Sweeney's *Live Bait*.

No. When I close my eyes to ponder which images are most likely to float first to the surface of memory in the future, here's what pops up: O.J., his impassively handsome face maintaining an almost otherworldly immutability beneath some of the most intense camera scrutiny in television history; Jacques Parizeau, his groomed, aristocratic immaculacy offset by a dental gap which too conveniently bespeaks irreparable separation; golf pro Premier Mike Harris of Ontario, the handdog hatchet-wielder for "common sense" whose don't-blame-me folksiness helps shrug off outrage over the actions of what may be the most inhumanely business-like—not to mention culture-hating—government this country has ever seen. (And which, as I write this, has already brought Ontario's hitherto expanding, thriving and *profitable* independent scene to a virtual halt. A two-movie-a-year man representing a two-movie-a-year constituency, Premier Harris will not easily be swayed by the international caché of *Rude* or *Exotica*: if we can't make blockbusters, better we not make anything at all.)

But mostly I see Paul and Karla—or as much of Bernardo and Homolka as I was mercifully permitted to see—and no doubt the jurors in that tragic trial will

conjur more corrosive pictures than these: the couple's cheery, party-down banality paraded for the camera in various hotel rooms and (could this have been Calvin Klein's inspiration?) shag-carpeted Southern Ontario rec-rooms; their smug and terrifying bottle-blond superficiality; their fatal attraction to images as the ultimate (only?) certifier of power and self. And—at the risk of indulging in the most tasteless segue in the history of Canadian film writing—it is in this regard that one may return to the subject of movies in this lunatic year because, as someone I know quipped of the couple's compulsive shutterbuggery: "I guess you'd have to call them Canada's most famous movie directors."

As distinct as these events were, together they contribute to a swelling sense of fracture; of centres not holding and things falling (or about to fall) apart. Maybe it's *fin-de-siècle* dread, that sense of Biblical foreboding that visits every generation straddling a century which only intensifies apocalyptically when the century spills over a millennial abyss. But, while the media ubiquity of the O.J. case is more proof of the death of borders as containers of national distinction, the rest are most potently meaningful in the country which produced them. And what they signify—a country with a rapidly unravelling sense of self and stability—may perhaps be most starkly compelling to those of us whose childhoods intersected with the Centennial rave-up of 1967. It was a year when ideas of national unity and cohesion became a form of pop cult pep rally, when even the free, cellophane-packaged medallions we

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were given in school (few of which seem to have survived the bumpy passage of the past three decades) seemed to bolster a sense of palpable, freshly minted national possibility. Even attending Expo in Montreal—which today looks pretty post-apocalyptic itself—was less holiday than national duty, a pilgrimage made by all good citizens. 1967 seemed to make good citizens of us all.

Now, consider those newsworthy faces again, this time in the context of that bygone passage through feel-good nationalism. The outcome of the sovereignty referendum notwithstanding, Parizeau represents what must be the final nail in the casket of national unity based on pan-Canadian Anglo-French relations. As I grew up in the warm glow of *chez Hélène*, the dream of Canada was inextricable from the fantasy of a bilingual utopia, an idea (for as anyone who watches Canadian movies in both languages knows, that's all it ever really was) which will be put to rest once and for all, Yes or No. But this also puts to rest an idea of nation which prevailed the better part of this century. Its disappearance would be far easier to applaud were it not for the fact that no subsequent idea seems poised to take its place. The abyss again.

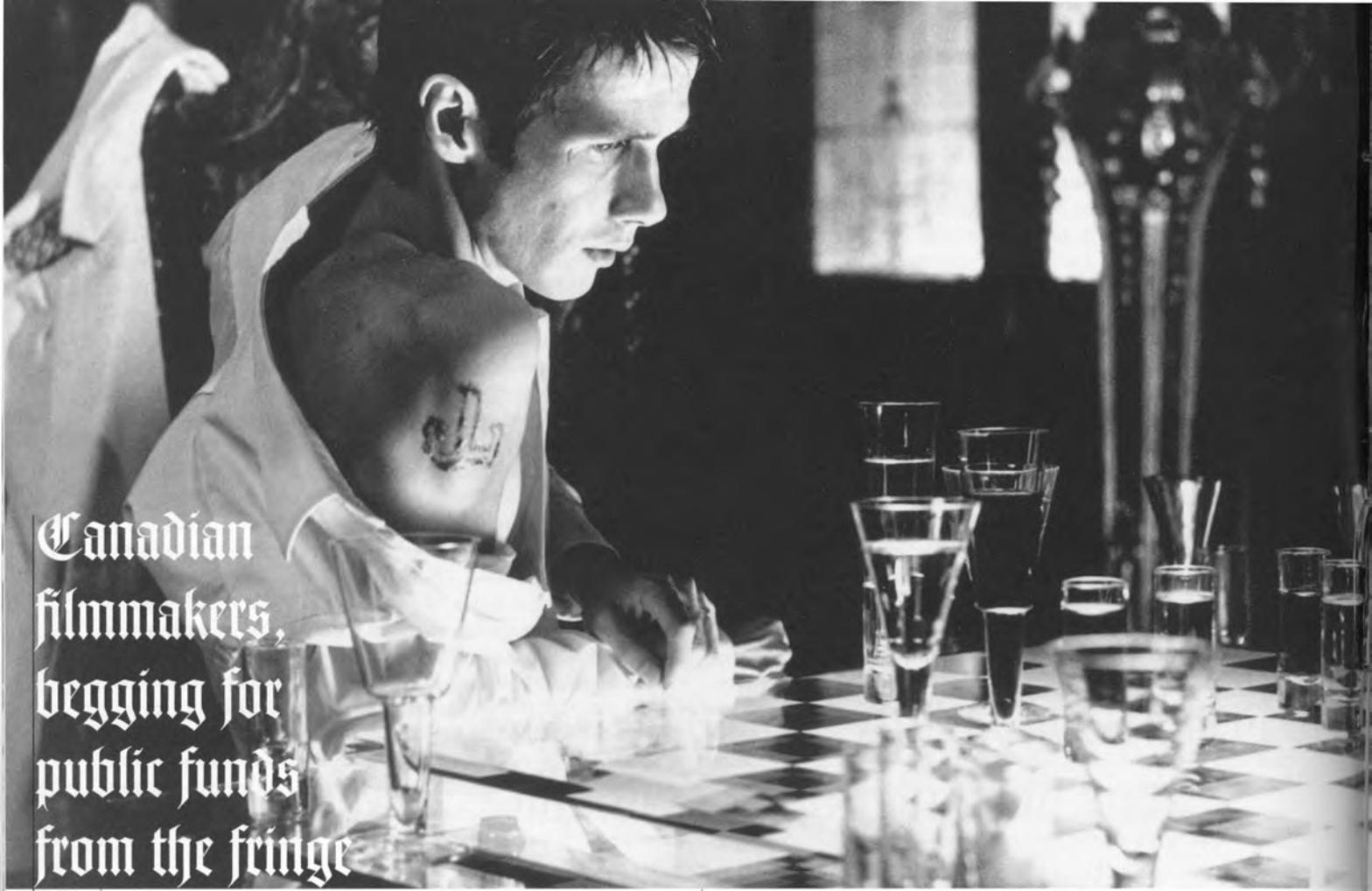
Harris, whose largely rural-supported Tories are so indifferent to anything but numbers they make Ralph Klein look like Calvin, represents the death knell of another idea of Canada. For this government, which sees nothing vindictive or punishing about drastically cutting welfare *and* day care subsidies from the same single mothers—they're women, they're poor, and their domestic labour has no transactable value—the dream of a balanced budget justifies any action which promises to reduce government expenses. Sacrificed to this idea—along with health care, education, employment equity, culture, multiculturalism, public broadcasting and public housing—is the notion of Canada as a benevolent state. I was raised on the apparently unfashionable idea of govern-

ment existing (in part) to serve those who may have difficulty serving themselves, even if it means government which doesn't turn a profit. Since when did caring come with a price tag? But, as tight-fisted followers of the post-Reagan/Thatcherite school of governance as business, the Harris Gang sees any governing which doesn't tally as wasteful and thus dispensable governing—check-book proof Marilyn Waring is right. I couldn't help but think of this last fall as Michael Moore, director of the sloppy but admirable political satire *Canadian Bacon*, made himself ubiquitously available to Canadian media to promote his deeply commercially impaired movie. As Moore, a *Mother Jones*-leftist with sound-bite smarts, struggled to flatter Canadians with his wistful vision of this country as a quasi-socialist haven for progressive social policy, Mike Harris was in the process of bulldozing that very vision into bottom-line oblivion. It was irony as bleak as a February afternoon.

What allows the current government of Ontario to inflict pain with such Schwarzeneggerian impunity is exactly this lack of obligation to any kind of national idea or sense of cultural or historical context. Despite inevitable official noise about “putting the province back on track,” “investing in the future,” and “putting more power in the hands of citizens”—blah, blah, blah—this is really government by business, for business and *as* business. In using the marketplace as a model for governance (which also explains the hair-raising equation of education and culture to groceries) the Ontario government embraces—as have Reagan, Thatcher, Manning and Klein—multinational corporate business as an ideological model, a model which leaves no room for such uncalculable national resources as culture, tradition or identity. Only money is permitted to talk. Everything else is bullshit, and therefore must walk, presumably out of Ontario.



from left, *CURTIS'S CHARM*: thieving mice, murderous squirrels and a heavy-duty voodoo hex; *RUDE*: the film reflects “a light-year-wide range in approaches to style and storytelling”; *HOUSE*: insanity is just seeing things differently than most folks



Canadian filmmakers, begging for public funds from the fringe

while Hollywood struggles to count all the cash flowing southward, have always had ample reason to suspect the Canadian benevolent national ideal may be a sham

Like this government, Paul Bernardo was a dedicated believer in the borderless bottom line. While a student of (what else?) business at the University of Toronto, his bedroom at the family home in Scarborough, Ontario—the same neighbourhood he terrorized as a sadistic serial rapist with a penchant for sodomy and verbal humiliation—was decorated with the kind of uptempo, self-help, me-first bromides one imagines hearing at a pep rally for the Common Sense Revolution: “Poverty is self-imposed,” “Money never sleeps,” “There are winners, and there are whiners,” and, perhaps most aptly in the case of both killer and government, “No more Mr. Nice Guy.” A disciple and former card-carrying member

of Jim Bakker’s Praise the Lord Club—of which he admired everything except, not surprisingly for a psychopath, the love-thy-neighbour stuff—Bernardo was also a hardcore ends-justify-means sort of guy. Like a precursor to the current provincial government, he was easily able to reduce human experience to a commodity, to be used and discarded according to immediate market value. The moment it cost more than it was worth, he choked the life out of it. Simple supply and demand. Common sense.

A former golf pro and strip club habitu , Harris has made no public statements regarding his tastes in pop culture, but I’ll bet they depend heavily on the border-hopping global entertainment economy. Bernardo’s certainly did. Fancying himself the next great white rap hope after the already forgotten Vanilla Ice (curiously, that role would instead fall to a Canadian ex-felon named Snow), Bernardo loved violent American movies. He found a role model—not to mention another wall-full of bromides—in Michael Douglas’s impersonation of the ruthless financier Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street*. A former accountant with Price Waterhouse, the same guys who keep those Oscar® ballots a secret, he once savagely beat his wife—the equally but differently terrifying Karla Homolka—for failing to tape *The Simpsons*. The income which made his life of crime possible is itself a model of transnational entrepreneurialism—smuggling cigarettes across the border in Niagara Falls. He wanted to be a big international star—a goal which he’s arguably attained—and from prison he no doubt concurs that a healthy Ontario is one which, for the sake of balanced books, must learn to do without.

PHOTOGRAPH: LE CONFESSONNAL BY CLAUDEL HOOT



from left, *LE CONFESSIOONAL*: icily assured, visually arresting; *THE CHAMPAGNE SAFARI*: about the shaping of history by those with the will and power to do so; *CANADIAN BACON*: John Candy, on his way to invade Canada from the United States, is stopped by Dan Aykroyd, a Canadian cop demanding bilingual graffiti on the truck



“Self-denial leads to self-mastery” was another banner in the Bernardo bedroom.

On the subject of denial, just yesterday the Ontario government announced the latest in a series of massive, multi-million-dollar cuts to social service programs, a conspicuous number of them designed for the assistance of underclass women. Interestingly, one of these was a program designed to counsel and educate men prone to spousal abuse. Obviously, domestic violence is simply not an issue for Mike Harris, and publicly sponsored campaigns against it are thus a bad investment. Bernardo would no doubt agree.

The point is, the paradigms are slipping. In the absence of a potent national mythology to defer to—the kind of mythology, for better or worse, shared even by Americans who hate each other—Canada as an idea is in a state of advanced disrepair, a fact which is only tragic if you believe such things as national mythologies to be good in the first place. How many have such ideas killed? Moreover, the collapse of a certain vision of Canada—the one which imagined a polite liberal utopia where difference is tolerated and government is not an investment but a contract—is lamentable only insofar as it ever really existed, or national mythologies make countries better places to live.

Canadian filmmakers, who have only very rarely been included in this vision, can't be surprised by its collapse. In fact, not only are they in a particularly good position to assess the ideas for flaws, they've been looking at the Emperor's naked butt for decades. This could be why our film culture has—with the rare exception of such establishment-friendly tokens as Denys Arcand, Norman Jewison, David Cronenberg and lately Atom Egoyan—never gained a foothold in the institutional vision of Canada. But causation flows both ways: it's the chronic state of exile from the official channels of culture-making in this country, combined

with the arduous conditions of production which make that exile a fact of life. This has proven a fertile seedbed for the care and nurturing of dissent. In a word, Canadian filmmakers, begging for public funds from the fringe while Hollywood struggles to count all the cash flowing southward, have always had ample reason to suspect the Canadian benevolent national ideal may be a sham. It's just taken history this long to bear out what moviemakers have suspected for years.

By now, convention-bashing is such an entrenched part of Canadian filmmaking, it's more surprising to see movies which don't try and upend our assumptions than those that do. “Why don't Canadians make more commercial movies?” is a refrain I've heard often. The implication being, of course, that: (a) Canadian filmmakers deserve their culturally marginalized status because they asked for it; and, (b) like a Canadian version of *Field of Dreams* (that rousing endorsement of American patriarchy written by a Canadian), if we just build them, an audience will come. These assumptions persist because they're based in denial; denial of the fact that nobody's forced Canadian filmmakers to make non-commercial movies (“commercial” being a dubiously Hollywood-derived notion anyway); and denial of the fact that even if we did make more “commercial” movies, it would do nothing to balance a playing field systemically tilted southward.

Perhaps we must admit that, apart from the arguable notion that Canadians are supposed to harbour this puritanical revulsion of glitz and success—tell it to Lantos or Drabinsky, man—the conditions for producing movies in this country have inevitably resulted in a national cinema of systematic nonconformity. Which, for this viewer is exactly what makes them such a gas to watch. For the most part, Hollywood movies do precisely what's expected of them, which may be good business practice, but it certainly makes for a lot of bilge. Freed from the obligation, or

PHOTOGRAPHS: THE CHAMPAGNE SAFARI COURTESY OF FIELD SEVEN FILMS; CANADIAN BACON BY RAEY

even the possibility, of creating blockbusters, the best Canadian films venture deeply into what's unexpected, a tendency which is as impressive for its un-corporate chutzpah as its sheer tenacity. As punk culture has always known, being a loser is one thing—but being a proud loser something else.

At the Toronto International Film Festival's Perspective Canada program, where a few dozen new Canadian movies of varying length, form and quality are annually screened, it is tempting to take the national temperature in the dark. Which is tricky. A festival program is selective, which means that that which does not move the programmers doesn't board the bus. Still, the sheer range of films on display—from Mike Hoolboom's gorgeously grotesque *House of Pain* to Mort Ransen's pro-labour period romance *Margaret's Museum*—at least suggests a selection committee which considers eclecticism a key component of programming. Which is precisely where and why things get interesting.

Featuring an inspirationally high number of first-time features, the 1995 Perspective Canada program—which included many of the Canadian movies also screened at festivals in Halifax, Montreal, Sudbury and Vancouver—provided a vivid display of the extent of discontent motivating our moviemakers today. Or if not discontent, then a determination to make us think, see and experience things differently. In fact, the very idea of things not being what they seemed was so pervasive among the new crop of Canadian movies that it practically took on generic status. John L'Ecuyer's *Curtis's Charm*, Holly Dale's *Blood & Donuts*, Robert Lepage's *Le confessionnal*, Christian Duguay's *Screamers*, George Ungar's *The Champagne Safari*, and Clement Virgo's *Rude* may reflect a light-year-wide range in approaches to style and storytelling. They're all rooted in the assumption that reality is nothing more, or less, than a matter of perception, and to alter ways of seeing is to change experience itself. The treacherous instability of objective experience—a theme which has haunted Cronenberg, Egoyan and Michael Snow for years—is not only what lends these films their urgency and expressive power, it's what makes them such fascinating barometers of a country undergoing a profound crisis of self-knowledge. Consider them the shards of a shattered mirror, each reflecting its own image, something new and vital from the collapse of the big picture.

In *Le confessionnal*, the icily assured, visually arresting first feature by the heralded boy genius of Quebec theatre, Robert Lepage, the making of movies (Hitchcock's directing of *I Confess* in Quebec City in 1952) and the struggle for self are inextricable parts of the same puzzle: Lepage understands precisely the manner in which media mingles with personal history today. The film chronicles the way in which two men—half-brothers played by Lothaire Bluteau and Patrick Goyette—struggle to untangle the riddle of paternity. Like Hitchcock, who shot his metaphysical thriller in the city where *Le confessionnal's* director was born, Lepage understands that the mystery, and its potential to undermine the process of perception, is finally far more alluring than the solution. Real knowledge is knowing the best questions to ask.

In Bruce Sweeney's award-winning, ultra low-budget *Live Bait*, which also draws loosely from the filmmaker's personal history, a verbally confident, sexually terrified 23-year-old named Trevor (Tom Scholte), is struggling to see himself through the screens others impose on him. While women seem naturally drawn to his dryly self-punishing wit, and his mother (played superbly by Babz Chula) would clearly be happy to drop dead folding his briefs, age, intelligence and idleness are combining to shatter Trevor's complacency irrevocably. Without ever indulging

in the gothic scare tactics of *Blue Velvet*, Sweeney still manages to make affluent suburbia seem as inviting as a solitary stretch in the Kingston Pen. A live-at-home virgin, Trevor is definitely the Gen-X heir to the bleak, black-and-white suburban despair that visited Peter Kastner in *Nobody Waved Good-bye*, but with a significant difference: where Don Owen's brashly brainless punk wound up on a rainy road to nowhere, Sweeney's hero recognizes and embraces the potential for rebirth that attends the collapse of the old order. After his family implodes and Trevor consummates his attraction to a sixty-something artist (Micki Maunsell), Sweeney assures us that, thanks largely to the breakdown of the suburban dream, Trevor will make out okay after all.

While not quite so breezily optimistic, John L'Ecuyer's junkie comedy *Curtis's Charm*, which is based on a story by ex-junkie-cult rocker Jim Carroll, is also about new ways of seeing. Leaving the corner store one morning, a recently recovered heroin addict (Callum Rennie) runs into an old drug buddy named Curtis (Maurice Dean Wint). Still in a pre-recovered state, Curtis has become convinced that his wife and mother-in-law have laid a heavy-duty voodoo hex on his head, the proof of which is in the absurd hallucinations—like a thieving mouse and a murderous squirrel—which the smack-addled Curtis is convinced are real. Well acquainted with the vivid nature of pharmaceutical delirium, Curtis's pal aims to help his friend by convincing him that he too is seeing the same stuff. It's his naive belief that by doing so he will help rope his friend back to reality. But the final joke isn't on Curtis, it's on his pal, whose altruistic indulgence of Curtis's demons leaves his own world irredeemably rocked. To see things the way Curtis does is to give up on reason itself and to recognize that reason may be the ultimate hallucination.

When Charles Bedaux, the millionaire entrepreneur and industrialist whose hairbrained expedition across the northeastern Rockies in 1934 is the subject of George Ungar's *The Champagne Safari*, began assembling the team for his trek, he made sure a crack cinematographer (*Tabu's* Floyd Crosby) was along. Why? So that Bedaux, who understood a thing or two about history, could shape the contours of his mythology. A fascinating account of an epic 20th-century enigma, *Safari* is ultimately about the shaping of history by those with the will and power to do so. A sly opportunist who believed that the machinations of capital were unsullied by ideology or politics, Bedaux is a creepier *Zelig*. A friend to Nazis and Jewish industrialists, the host of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's nuptials, a darling of corporate America, and a developer of an industrial efficiency system which reduced human labour to units of movement (a system made possible, incidentally, by motion picture technology) Bedaux's story reveals much about the veiled nature of this century's history, which probably explains why he himself has largely remained locked

right, *LIVE BAIT*: affluent suburbia seen as inviting as a solitary stretch in the Kingston Pen; opposite page, *SCREAMERS*: a Canadian/American/Japanese co-production based on a Philip K. Dick short story



behind historical curtains himself. *The Champagne Safari* suggests that Bedaux finally knew too much about the deceptions behind the official record to be included in the record himself.

Terre Nash's *Who's Counting? Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies and Global Economics* is an absorbing account of the life and theories of the radical economist and former politician from New Zealand. Nash's film demonstrates how conventional economics, which can only measure worth according to dollars, and which only accords dollar value to commodities which can be sold, determines who counts and who doesn't in the context of contemporary capitalism. As such, it is another case of exposing "objective" reality—in this case economics—as the subjective scam that it is. Seeing is believing; believing is reality. Waring's question is: what about those people the economic system chooses not to see, like mothers, the poor and Third World labourers? Does this mean they don't exist? Has Ms. Waring been to Ontario lately, where legislated invisibility spreads daily?

Travelling to the small town of Hope Springs, Daniel MacIvor in Laurie Lynd's *House* at first seems a likeable nutcase. Fresh from group therapy, he has decided to recycle his neurosis into a form of performance art. After stapling handbills around town, he sets up a chair on stage in an abandoned theatre (which aptly might also be a church) and starts ranting. Initially his tirades seem to be the product of an unhinged mind. Then the various people who attend the performance begin to recollect incidents eerily identical to those recounted by their fidgety, post-

therapeutic storyteller. Insanity is just seeing things differently than most folks.

Stuck on a godforsaken mining planet at the tail end of a decade of bloody corporate warfare, the characters in Christian Duguay's terrifically sharp-toothed *Screamers* (a Canadian/American/Japanese co-production co-scripted by *Alien*'s Dan O'Bannon and based on a Philip K. Dick short story) are experiencing the most extreme form of perceptual crisis imaginable. Their lives literally depend on knowing what's going on, but knowing what's going on has become impossible in a world where deception is in the direct economic interest of those in charge. Striking out across dangerous terrain teaming with duplicitous humanoid droids and killer subterranean slicing devices known as screamers, veteran hard-boiled cynic Hendricksson (Peter Weller) ventures deeply into the world of state-supported perceptual treachery. Even he is impressed by the awesome lengths to which the greedy will go. A smartly paranoid science fiction parable which substitutes corporate ideology for flesh-eating aliens as the ultimate galactic horror, *Screamers* serves excellently as a survival primer for those bracing themselves for budget-balancing, back-to-business provincial cuts. When those limb-slicing, heavy metal frisbees started dismembering the luckless grunts in *Screamers*

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