

The Winnipeg Film Group (WFG) had been in operation for just over 10 years when director Greg Hanec and writer Mitch Brown conceived *Downtime*, the first feature film made from within its membership. Until then, WFG members had contented themselves with short documentaries, experimental films and the occasional 10- to 20-minute drama, most notably *The Three Worlds of Nick* (1984) triptych by John Paizs. A dramatic feature was considered too ambitious and even foolhardy by a community still rather timid concerning its own potential. Yet with a minuscule budget of \$16,000.00, before any significant funding source or feature-film infrastructure was in place in Manitoba, and long before the indie shoestring-budget miracles of *Slacker* (1991) and *El Mariachi* (1992), Hanec and Brown persevered and not only completed their project, but created one of the best feature films ever made in Manitoba. *Downtime* (1986) transcends the whole concept of production values and finds its métier in its technological simplicity.



Though *Downtime* has more of a stylistic affinity with the minimalist films of James Benning than Jim Jarmusch, it was with *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) that most of the comparisons were drawn at the time of its release. The two films certainly bear some stylistic similarities—the use of wide shots and long takes, the intense affiliation of character with environment—yet their essential sensibility is quite different. Although both films deal with characters that are adrift, the characters in *Stranger than Paradise* are seen as the architects of their own fate, if not necessarily by their actions, then at least by their temperament. *Downtime*, on the other hand, evokes a world of ennui. The characters exist in their environment like smudges, obscured by shadow or disappearing into the compositional pattern of line and angle as though camouflaged. The very distinction between character and environment, where one begins and the other ends, is often obscure.

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The story depicts the aimless lives of a group of young adults, dragging themselves through the pointless routine of their menial jobs, and having no life outside of those jobs. They are desperate to fill the time, but lack the imagination, energy or will to manage even that. For the characters, days, hours and even seconds drag by with hope-crushing similarity. Their few pathetic attempts to create some glimmer of freshness in their lives are hopelessly doomed to failure in a world defined by stasis. Their lives are an endless chain of moments of torpidity, but the pain of these soulless beings is so visibly real it is impossible to be bored. It's a subtle, gentle and witty film, and possibly one of the darkest visions I have ever seen. Paradoxically, its humour and compassion make it a thoroughly watchable, even enjoyable.

A MINIMALIST COMEDY
OF DESPAIR

BY John Kozak

Though essentially plotless, what gives *Downtime* momentum is the character's desperate attempts to forge some kind of human connections. The central character, a Woman who works in a convenience store (played with somnambulist perfection by Maureen Gammelseter) is the film's central focus. A young Man, who works as a janitor in a school, and a young girl, who works at a movie-theatre concession stand, make repeated attempts to establish some kind of relationship with the Woman. Ironically, although she is the locus of the action, she is simultaneously the one character totally devoid of spirit. She wanders through her store like a cursed ghost, fated to eternally stock shelves and run the till. All the other characters at least try to make some attempts at human contact, but the Woman seems incapable of even understanding their actions, much less respond to them.

Whereas the Woman is a wraith, emotionless and dead, the janitor (played with subtle understatement by Padraic O'Beirn) epitomizes quiet desperation. At the school where he works on the night shift, he plods through his job like an inmate doing time. We see him enter a small utility room and slowly drain the water out of a large pail. Then he proceeds to slowly fill the pail again with water. We watch the whole action unfold in unmanipulated real time, yet this scene, like all the scenes of the janitor at work, has a certain mesmeric appeal. Part of our fascination is the gradual realization, and horror, that we have already learned all we need to know about his job and his life.

At home, we see the Man sitting on the edge of his bed, staring blankly into space, surrounded on all sides by a canopy of darkness. Occasionally he shuffles his body slightly, squints or moves his head. But that's all. Sometimes it appears as though he is about to take some sort of action, maybe even muster the will to stand up, or perhaps a thought has flitted across his brow, but in the end he does not move. Reminiscent of the excruciating comedy routines of Andy Kaufman, this scene both tantalizes and infuriates; the anticipation of action and the frustration of waiting so long and not being rewarded are part of this film's sublime subtlety. The janitor's most overt action is a feeble attempt to rob the store where the Woman works, desperate to evoke some kind of reaction from anyone. He enters with a turtle-neck pulled up over his head, the opening drooping down in front, now faceless

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as well as nameless. He demands "all the money," but the woman's lack of reaction reveals the futility of this act—like all acts—and he simply abandons it.

Unlike the two central characters, who remain nameless and are identifiable only by their menial jobs, the young girl, Debbie (Debbie Williamson), has a name (perhaps as a reward for exhibiting some hint of a personality). We are introduced to her at the laundromat as a rather strange dark-haired girl who the Woman from the convenience store finds herself sitting beside while waiting for her clothes to dry. Immediately distinguishable from all the characters in the film by an infuriating extroversion, Debbie instantly decides that she is going to be friends with this woman, introducing the one positive character in the film in the form of the dreaded overly friendly stranger.

Establishing a dialogue with the Woman is virtually impossible, but Debbie is the type who is impervious to snubs. She gets a conversation going, but only because she is doing all the talking and the Woman does not have the willpower to just walk away or even quietly protest. Debbie's final attempt at a connection with the Woman is to ask her advice about whether or not she should move in with her boyfriend, Ray. The Woman's response is utter indifference, and even Debbie begins to recognize the futility of trying to nurture a friendship with this "ghost." After this, Debbie abandons the Woman and focuses on Ray.

Clearly not identified with his job, he has none, Ray (Ray Impey) is one of the few characters in the film who is capable of effecting change, although this change proves to be negative for him. He successfully negotiates moving Debbie's belongings into his apartment, a task that is hopelessly beyond Debbie's powers, but once there, Ray surveys the carnage done to his living room—while Debbie lies on the floor with the stereo headphones cranked to full volume—pondering the possible mistake he has made. Though they come the closest to creating a human bond, their relationship is doomed. As Ray attempts to organize things, cleaning out a closet for Debbie's possessions, he comes across a rifle. He absentmindedly carries it around with him for the rest of the conversation, ominously suggesting some potential use as he becomes more and more frustrated

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Maureen Gamelster

with her. The last time we see them, Debbie is telling Ray that she flushed his toothbrush down the toilet but is unable to explain why.

Though the film's focus is on character and the structure appears loose, even formless at times, this is deceptive. The film is constructed with a delicate and insightful precision and while individual scenes seem to unfold at a painstakingly slow pace, the actual narrative moves quickly and is constructed with extreme economy. In the opening scene, the janitor enters the convenience store to buy milk. After a short, somewhat surreal verbal exchange with the Woman, he asks her out on a date. She says "no" and he leaves. The scene appears as random and meaningless as the lives of the characters; however, even though the pacing seems slow, the main characters have been introduced, one of the main plot threads has been established and the tone of the film has been set. A lot has been set in motion in a scene that seems to epitomize torpor and malaise.

The real story of *Downtime*, however, is told in shadow and form. The most obvious motif in the film is the use of black space and shadow. Even in the day scenes, darkness seems to envelope the world. Shadows follow the characters like a presence, obliterating their faces, looming over them like a cloud and closing in from all sides. Numerous scenes are shot through silhouetted doorways, the sides of the door frame appearing like two giant pillars of darkness threatening to squeeze the characters out of existence. The characters also seem to generate their own darkness. Their off-screen presence is often felt more keenly than their on-screen presence as they step out of frame, obstructing the light source and plunging the set into darkness. At the school, the janitor enters a locker room, then turns and approaches the camera. Shot with a telephoto lens, his progress is slow. As soon as he moves toward the camera, he immediately steps into shadow and becomes a dark figure, gradually dominating more and more of the frame. As he approaches, he begins to drift out of focus. Eventually he becomes nothing more than a giant black blur, obliterating the frame.

However, the unorthodox and unexpected use of close-ups is probably the most conspicuously deliberate stylistic device the film employs. They are bold, unforeseen, often at what appears an inappropriate time

capturing a sudden look of puzzlement, confusion or perhaps dread. The first time this is used it's shocking and disorienting. The Woman returns to her apartment after work. The scene unfolds in a leisurely long shot as she takes off her shoes and sits on the sofa to relax with a cup of coffee. She sips her coffee, occasionally stirring it while staring blankly at the floor. Then with a startling suddenness, the image cuts to an extreme close-up of her face. She looks surprised, puzzled, with a trace of fear in her eyes as though caught in a moment of naked self-awareness. But just as quickly the moment is gone, and as the angle reverts back to wide shot the Woman sinks back into her usual benumbed state.

If there is a story arc, the turning point occurs about midway through the film when Debbie, Ray and the Woman go to a party. Up to this point there has been a gradual development of character interaction, but after this scene a kind of social rigor mortis sets in. They arrive at the back door of a small bungalow, a faint light inside outlining the window. They wander into the frame, their presence announced by their voices alone as they are submerged in the exterior darkness. The house looks dead. Debbie knocks on the door. After a brief wait, an old man descends from the inner depths of the house, flipping on the outside porch light. Debbie inquires about the party and a faint, muffled "no" is heard from inside the house. The old man turns off the light and disappears back inside. After a pause we hear the three slowly shuffle away from the house in the darkness, their party plans dashed.

After this incident, they sit in Ray's car wondering what to do next. The Woman sits in the back seat with the same blank expression as always. Then, in a remarkable shot, we cut to her point of view of Ray sitting in the driver's seat. He is facing front, looking out through the windshield into a vast expanse of darkness. The camera pans away from him and stops, looking directly out through the windshield. The entire frame is black except for the rear-view mirror in the very top corner of the frame reflecting Ray's eyes, as though he were peering into an alien and forbidding world through a small tear in the darkness.

Ultimately, everything ends where it started—in stasis. All the characters end up where they began, the pattern of their lives revealed in the opening image of the film; a train moving across the screen from left to right so slowly its motion is almost undetectable. There is no beginning to the train and no end, just an endless progression of cars that all look the same, going nowhere. This remarkable and complex film created considerable excitement when it was first shown in Winnipeg in the winter of 1986. Praised by local reviewers, and supported by Telefilm Canada as an official selection at the Berlin Film Festival, and there was an anticipation of a lengthy festival run, continued critical success and theatrical distribution. But rather inexplicably, none of this ever materialized. It never received distribution and has languished in the vaults of the Winnipeg Film Group for the past 15 years, virtually forgotten. Yet *Downtime* deserves its place in the canon of Canadian cinema. It's a hidden treasure that needs to be rediscovered and marvelled at by a new generation of filmgoers.

TAKE ONE