

by Antony Anderson

Some time ago, I was grazing through the information autobahn when I came across *Canadian Reflections*, the weekly CBC program devoted to short films; so devoted, it broadcasts these films during the Friday afternoon dead zone.

The offering that day, *Monument*, featured a nice bumbling middle-aged paperboy who discovers that

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Gawking

he has a lethal brain tumour. His misery is compounded by two bullies who delight in harassing him. After a truly inspired sequence in which a graveyard statue urges him to preserve himself in stone, our hapless hero builds a huge papier-mâché replica of his own head. It sits in a barren field until the two fiendish louts burn it down, obliterating

at

our hero's quest for immortality. However, he is able to take small but real comfort from the friendship of two neighbourhood children.

As I watched this man grope through life with all the enthusiasm of a cow becoming hamburger, I had a sinking feeling that I'd seen him before. He wasn't a creation. In movieland, everything is sym-

Geeks



the embodiment of testosterone gloire: (clockwise from top left) CLINT EASTWOOD, JEAN-PAUL BELMONDO, MARCELLO MASTROIANNI and GÉRARD DEPARDIEU

bolic and has to mean something else. I know this. I went to film school.

In order to figure this character out, I inevitably moved him from a personal to a universal existence. Italian men, or more specifically Italian intellectuals, can project their existential elegance onto the sublime features of Marcello Mastroianni. For a brief period in the 1980s, Aussie men unleashed their irreverent spunk through the grizzled Paul Hogan. Gérard Depardieu, apparently the only working actor in France, is the current expression of its testosterone *gloire*, taking over from men like Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Gabin. Americans are unique in having perhaps more reflections, more embodiments than any other nation on the planet, from Clint Eastwood to Woody Allen, but then that's Hollywood.

Who speaks for Canada? Male, anglo Canada? Obviously not Gérard, Marcello or Clint. Then I realized, with a slightly sickening recognition, that this middle-aged newspaper boy was and is the current film embodiment of Canadian manhood. Dredged up from those darkest parts of ourselves, quivering, cringing, and colonial, he is the Dweeb, the Geek, the Meta-Nerd, and what's more, he is everywhere. It is virtually impossible to consume our celluloid without having to chew over his nerd bits and geek bones. The actual quality of the movie is irrelevant. No matter how gifted or pedestrian, Canadian filmmakers are addicted to telling their stories through the eyes of Geeks. After years of evolution, the Dweeb/Geek is now every bit as defined in Canadian Cinema as more historical, Hollywood archetypes such as the Cowboy, the Gangster and the Private Eye. Single, if not asexual, devoid of charisma, hopelessly insecure, thoroughly polite, often non-verbal, almost always on the verge of flinching, the Dweeb/Geek is frozen

on the brink of being. He is essentially reluctant to be alive. This is He and He is We, or rather, the part of We that can be seen reflected on our national screens.

My earliest and perhaps most pleasurable encounter with the Geek/Nerd/Dweeb was in John Paizs's brilliant feature, *Crime Wave*. The Winnipeg director cast himself as the consummate Dweeb — a mute, passive, solitary would-be filmmaker living in a small room above a garage, hopelessly incapable of completing his scripts. The bulk of his life took place in his extremely fertile and amusing imagination. Patricia Rozema's *White Room* featured Maurice Goodin as the predictably soft-centred and charisma-free Norman, the very normal, a nice middle-class boy, aspiring to Great Writing and Real Life Adventures. More voyeur than hero, Norman takes to sneaking into a rock star's garden to spy on her at night. During one of these nocturnal visits, Norman passively watches someone break into the house and kill her. This grim episode inspires Norman to try and

reinvent his suburban wallflower soul, without much success. Rozema was obviously aware of the risk she took in making her central character so pathetic. At one point in the film, someone warns Norman: "You can't have a wimp in the story. Guys won't identify with him and girls won't be attracted." Too true.

The Dweeb/Nerd surfaces in Yves Simoneau's *Perfectly Normal* as Lorenzo (Michael Riley), a small-town brewery worker who still lives with his mother, dreaming, in the words of one character, "tiny, fizzy little dreams." His mother's sudden death opens Lorenzo's life to a mysterious chef from Florida who arrives out of the blue and moves in without being asked. The chef drags Lorenzo into making the dream of singing in an opera come true. The Geek roams the screen in full force in John Pozer's compelling low-budget epic, *The Grocer's Wife*, a film which so impressed Atom Egoyan that he gave his prize money for best Canadian film at the 1991 Festival of Festivals to its director. Pozer's Meta-Nerd is a cringing, non-verbal factory



dweebs, geeks, meta-nerds: (clockwise from top left) JOHN PAIZS, AIDEN TIERNEY, SIMON WEBB, MICHAEL McMANUS and DAVID HEMBLEM

worker (Simon Webb) who lives in virginal isolation with his mother until death opens up his world to a bizarre intruder. Any bells ringing?

The leading men in Atom Egoyan's own films, while perhaps too fleshed out, too dark and complex to be quintessential Geeks, are still characterized by their familiar Geek quirks: bland passivity, a crippling sense of dislocation, and an inability to express meaningful dialogue, let alone passion. Like so many other screen Canadians, they're simply too damaged to be heroic. There are Dweeb/Geek echoes in the haunting films of Guy Maddin, in the polite and twisted twins played so magnificently by Jeremy Irons in David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*, and in Bruce McDonald's first two features, where Don McKellar plays an aspiring, low-key serial killer in

Roadkill, and returns as Pokey, a small-town barber who discovers a corpse and accompanies it south of the border in *Highway 61*. In both *Highway 61* and *Perfectly Normal*, the adventure can only occur while either travelling to America or because an American has barged his way into the Geek's humdrum world. This makes sense since it is only logical that if Canada lacks heroes, it must therefore lack adventures.

There are obvious historical precedents and contexts for the development of the Geek, some of which have been outlined by the real Queen of Canada, H.R.H. Margaret Atwood in her landmark book, *Survival*. So much Canadian history consists of the dispassionate recounting of our struggle to survive the physical and emotional immigration to an unforgiving landscape that did not

encourage recklessness or flamboyance. The qualities needed to survive were stoic ones: patience, endurance, faith. The struggle was also collective and therefore so were the successes, making it difficult for individual heroes to emerge. This reticence was further reinforced by our colonial upbringing which bequeathed to us a stunted imagination. We didn't need to dream. The British and the Americans did it for us. As a nation, we are more inclined to stand back and observe events rather than to celebrate and impose ourselves on others. It seems logical then that our film industry took root in a no-nonsense documentary tradition that never sought to inflate or exaggerate.

Now, perhaps there is nothing wrong in portraying a nation, and more specifically its male role models, as a collection of mere mortals, flinching backwards and forwards. They're harmless, polite and generally more humane than the average, factory-assembled Hollywood hero. And some Canadian filmmakers will no doubt argue precisely this point: we shouldn't import phony inflated heroes. Ultimately, I think they are right. Our heroes must be appropriate. The problem, however, is that the relentless parade of Dweebs gives the impression that we're a nation of bugs wriggling helplessly on our backs. Despite what our collective unconscious is telling us, I think we have grown up. One of the clearest signs of our maturity is that we no longer suffer through that incessant whine about the "Canadian identity crisis" which saturated the sixties and seventies. It was perfectly reasonable at the time but a real function of trembling youth. We no longer ask who we are. We ask where we are going – and that's a completely different question. I find also that I am wading through fewer and fewer kilotonnes of knee-jerk us vs. U.S. comparisons in the media – the constant looking over our shoulder at our richer, bigger neighbour to see who's better, smarter, got more handguns, less medicare, etc.

Until our filmmakers start inventing characters who aren't so relentlessly passive, however amusing and humane they may be, I suppose I shall have to content myself with the fact that most of these Geeks are, in fact, wriggling on their backs – that is, they are at least trying, however pathetically to engage in *Adventures and Life* ●

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