

Peter Lynch's

# Project Grizzly

A Distinctly Canadian Quest



BY LAURENCE GREEN

**Bold echoes of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*** come to mind during the title sequence of Peter Lynch's debut feature documentary, *Project Grizzly*. The allusion sounds precocious and far-fetched, but the careful irony and cultural resonance of both films is what links Lynch (who previously directed the award-winning short, *Arrowhead*) to the Italian master.

Fellini's movie opens with the second coming of Christ as citizens of Rome glimpse a vision of the Messiah flying over their city. Casting Rome as a corrupt community in need of redemption, Fellini replaces the multitude of heavenly hosts with a barely limping, broken-down stone Christ statue tethered to a helicopter. The rescue of modern Rome only merits the offer of a rigid and insincere embrace. In *Project Grizzly*, Alberta and the foothills of the Rocky mountains take the place of Rome and dangling from his helicopter, Lynch replaces Fellini's Christ with the Ursus Mark VI, an armoured, homemade space suit for close-quarter grizzly research. Somewhere here there is surely a comment on the Canadian need for cultural redemption and the kind of saviour that we warrant.

**"The biggest fear I have, the one that gives me the most turmoil, is monotony. Being bored, being average."— Troy Hurtubise**

Photo courtesy Greg Pacek



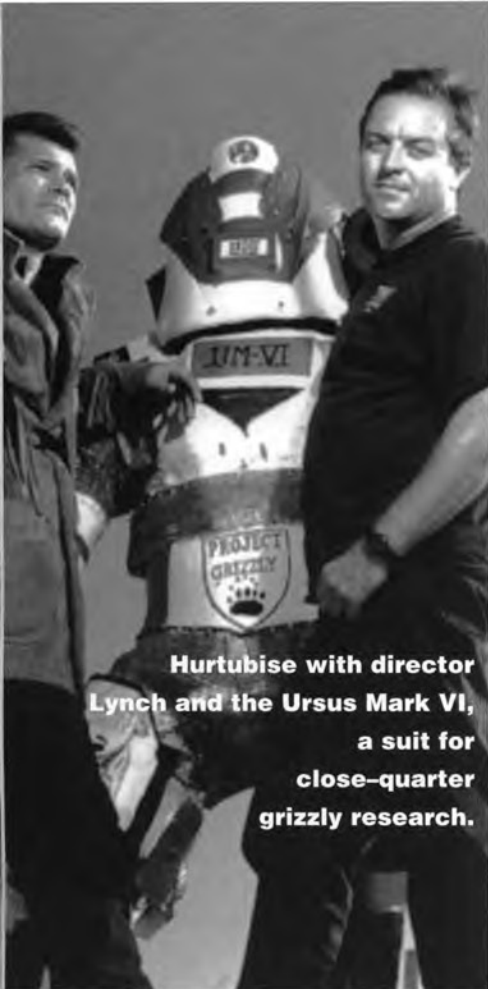
# Project Grizzly

North Bay scrap-metal merchant Troy Hurtubise has certainly sensed this need in his own life, if not in his nation's, and his resulting backyard project to comprehend the phenomenal has unwittingly cast him as our 1990s stand-in for a saviour. Director Lynch was quick to detect just how astoundingly well his subject fits the bill. Born and raised in the definitive Canadian communities of Scarborough and Hamilton, Hurtubise is a modern-day "Everyman" schooled in working-class heroics and shaped by two archetypal encounters with model patriarchs. His fabled father was one, an armchair anthropologist whose similar compulsions to explore the sublime drove him to recreate single-handedly the Iroquois village of Ska-Nah-Doht, a kid's ultimate tree fort. The other is the towering monster of a grizzly bear that Hurtubise confronted in a serene meadow in 1984, and appropriately nicknamed "The Old Man" with all the self-conscious echoes of William Faulkner's *The Bear* most definitely intended. The scars from both these interactions loom large in Hurtubise's complex consciousness and manifest themselves in a remarkable seven-year, \$150,000 project to design and build an impossible dream, the Ursus Mark VI, a protective suit inspired by the film *Robocop*, which will enable him to revisit that primal formative moment.

Of course, it is the artistry in Lynch, more than his daredevil protagonist, which delights in foregrounding the romantic quest in Hurtubise's dream of recreating the thrill of risking his life, this time for the sake of his self-styled science. Hurtubise doesn't talk about penetrating mysteries when he describes his obsession with confronting his nemesis. He admits that he's motivated, most of all, by a need to give himself some modest larger-than-life proportions and inject some purpose and meaning into his North Bay existence: "The biggest fear I have, the one that gives me the most turmoil, is monotony. Being bored, being average. I've got to have something that gives me the edge."

In Hurtubise's mind, his project's goals are realistic, and he takes it all very seriously. "I don't want to be a big Jacques Cousteau, just a little Jacques Cousteau," he says with a touch of modesty; and those fascinating activities inside Hurtubise's head are what really captivates us, much more than the machinations of a cowboy research expedition. The more taunted and enthralled we become, the more we tend to see those lavish, picturesque landscapes as interior rather than exterior and the Ursus Mark VI as an actual extension of Hurtubise the man, instead of his pride and joy. Hurtubise and the suit seem almost to merge into one, as if it is him, rather than the suit, which is inflated and invincible. As the duct-taped Major Matt Mason outfit withstands the farcical, simulated swat of a grizzly in the shape of a swinging pendulum-like tree trunk which delivers a 300-pound punch, we most certainly question just who is enduring the tests, Hurtubise himself, or his alter ego, the air-bagged, titanium-reinforced shield against banality. With the suit folding into Hurtubise's persona, and the legendary "Old Man" existing more in his mind and memory than anywhere else, the anticipated showdown between the trio recedes in importance so that Lynch's camera seems focused on Hurtubise alone.

# Project



**Hurtubise with director Lynch and the Ursus Mark VI, a suit for close-quarter grizzly research.**

In essence, *Project Grizzly* is a complex portrait of a single compelling character, a prototypical Canadian outdoorsman trapped by domesticity—a fanatic we evenhandedly admire and mock. We laugh along with the tongue-in-cheek CBC Radio *Morningside* interview that retells how Hurtubise's North Bay cohorts spend their weekends sending him tumbling off cliffs and bouncing off pick-up truck bumpers in various incarnations of the Ursus. But there is something undeniably noble in these small-town Canadians' commitment to a cause, especially in the shadow of millennial doom. The audience may segment into the hairy-chested, rooting for Hurtubise

Indeed, Lynch keeps *Project Grizzly* swaying between dream and reality throughout (again with echoes of Fellini), and consequently we waver between taking the characters and situations as the fabrications of fiction or the genuine *verités* of documentary. Lynch achieves an enviable equilibrium. The story rings too true to be real, while its absurdities push it beyond the inventiveness of any scriptwriter. And then, just as the film shifts from climax to denouement, the dream starts to unravel at the very instant it reaches its apex. Exposed at his most vulnerable, like a newly separated Siamese twin without his faithful Ursus Mark VI, Hurtubise draws his two nine-inch knives and reverts to the definitive siege mentality that saved him from "The Old Man" at 20, and now saves him every day from the crippling quotidian and mundane. In a riveting monologue, he leads us back to that seminal encounter with the grizzly, and the whole film pivots on this moment of dramatic recitation when Hurtubise attains his goal of authoring his own life, of reliving the defining confrontation that gave birth to his quest, to understand and resolve the narrative that has taken over his life ever since.

Lynch understands the power of this sequence and bravely and cleverly dissects it, giving us the first half as an opening, pre-credit teaser, and furnishing the rest at the very heart of the film, just where the much-anticipated rendezvous with the grizzly should be. It is both refreshing and disarming to see this kind of classic, dramatic moment enacted in the familiarity of a quintessential Canadian landscape, and the effect of this provocative footage underlines that *Project Grizzly* is swelling with layers of meaning much larger than even Hurtubise and his "Old Man."

every step of the way; the amused, laughing at this quirky eccentric while being unsuspectingly seduced by the quest metaphor; or the critical, delighting in Hurtubise's inadvertent exposure of all things masculine to ridicule. But divided though we may be in interpretation, we've all saddled up to ride along for the journey—all, undoubtedly, intrigued.

Lynch digs in to encourage as many metaphorical interpretations as possible for Hurtubise's suit and the quest it represents. To the Felliniesque irony that leaves us reeling in scenes like the garbage dump black bear research excursion and Hurtubise's habit of quoting Hollywood movies as often as scholarly documents and physics experts, Lynch adds the loaded, mythic proportions of the Western. Along with the trappings of this genre comes the obligatory formulaic choice: is our cultural identity determined by a nod towards Europe and civilization or a blazing trail towards the frontier? Lynch has no doubts about Hurtubise's preference. The problem is, Hurtubise doesn't seem to cut it as a mountain man, despite all his serious intentions, and in the tradition of Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, Lynch delineates his version of the revisionist Western, or as he calls it, "the Northern."

In a mock campfire scene, the boys gather in a corner of the North Bay donut shop, swapping stories and reflecting on the project's finest hour when one of the "pardners" suddenly produces a guitar to serenade Hurtubise with a rendition of "Alberta Bound." Once Lynch gets the "Project Grizzly" team out West and on horseback, the twanging guitars and banjos really get going to bring out the best in the accompanying vast, Sergio Leone-style landscapes, and accurately place Hurtubise and the boys in the setting they've been dreaming about rather than the "real" locale just outside Banff.

Seemingly emerging from the snow-capped summits and the swirling winds, Hurtubise walks out of the woods in his uniform of buckskin coat and red beret, and confronts the camera to tell his story. Stripped of the protective Tek plastic and Minnesota rubber he's spent years layering onto his old motorcycle helmet and football pads, Hurtubise stands tall with that elusive Paul Bunyan stature he's always wanted, oblivious to the way the silence of the falling snow shrouds him in claustrophobic tension and the slow subtle zoom closes in on him even tighter. "It's bringing back a lot of memories," he tells us. "It's almost eerie." And with that, we're hooked, hanging on his every word and tantalized by his unique and sincere naiveté.

There's no mistaking the national sensibility that produced the self-deprecating Hurtubise and his quest for self-validation, and with the pick-up trucks, Peter Gzowski, the Rocky mountains, donut shops, and plenty of machismo, *Project Grizzly* serves up unconcealed notice of its Canadian pedigree. "Many a man has snickered at me and many a man has laughed," Hurtubise can admit bravely, but at the same time he can also remain unswervingly fixated on his vision, even if it takes Lynch to articulate the underlying meanings of that vision.

*Project Grizzly* ends by reminding us that, particularly in Canada, where Hurtubise's siege mentality is rife, we're all wearing versions of that Ursus protective armour, and Lynch takes pains to point out how few of us are both willing to subject ourselves to the risky probing trials that threaten to reveal the tiniest chink, and capable of emerging as relatively unscathed as Hurtubise, still clinging to that edge, with guarded quest intact. "It's not about the bear," insists director Lynch. "If he'd have met the bear, Troy would have lost his quest. This way, the quest lives on." ■

# Grizzly

# ATTACKING THEATRES IN JANUARY

"★★★★! Fascinating, hilarious and slightly unsettling. Stimulating, intelligent and innovative."  
Geoff Pevere, *Globe & Mail*

"★★★★! Lynch charts Troy's journey with tongue-in-cheek humour and genuine affection. Great fun."  
Ingrid Randoja, *Now*

"*Grizzly* strikes a Northern nerve. One of the most popular movies in this year's Toronto International Film Festival."  
Dave Kehr, *New York Daily News*

"As inspiring a portrait of a Canadian as you're ever likely to see. A tonic for our queasy constitution."  
Daniel Richler, *Big Life*

"Grizzly Adams meets Timothy Leary. A 'must-see'."  
Mike Roberts, *Vancouver Province*

"A bear of a movie that had audiences howling with laughter."  
Antonia Zerbisias, *Toronto Star*

"Yet another in the fine and growing oeuvre of non-fiction features."  
Gemma Files, *Eye*

"★★★★! Hurtubise is as riveting a screen hero as Arnold Schwarzenegger."  
Marke Andrews, *Vancouver Sun*

"Hilarious. A quixotic quest, a *Field and Stream* excursion into the absurd."  
Brian D. Johnson, *Maclean's*

"Fascinating. Extraordinary."  
Geoff Brown, *Times of London*

"One of the funniest feature-length Canadian films ever made."  
Carole Corbeil, *Toronto Star*

"Mesmerizing and surreally funny."  
Lee Bacchus, *Vancouver Province*

"A psychological profile of a unique Canadian. Hurtubise's determination to realize his dream is inspirational, crazy and downright funny."  
Fiona Hughes, *Vancouver Courier*

"'Best of the fest.' Thoroughly engaging."  
Rob Salem, *Toronto Star*

"Dazzling! With a remarkable degree of artistic chutzpah, (Peter Lynch) had overturned the conventions of realistic portraiture in documentary to go for something far more ambitious."  
Katherine Gilday, *POV*



# PROJECT GRIZZLY

## HE HAS A DREAM... AND IT HAS SIX-INCH CLAWS

WITH TROY HURTUBISE DIRECTOR PETER LYNCH PRODUCER MICHAEL ALLDER

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