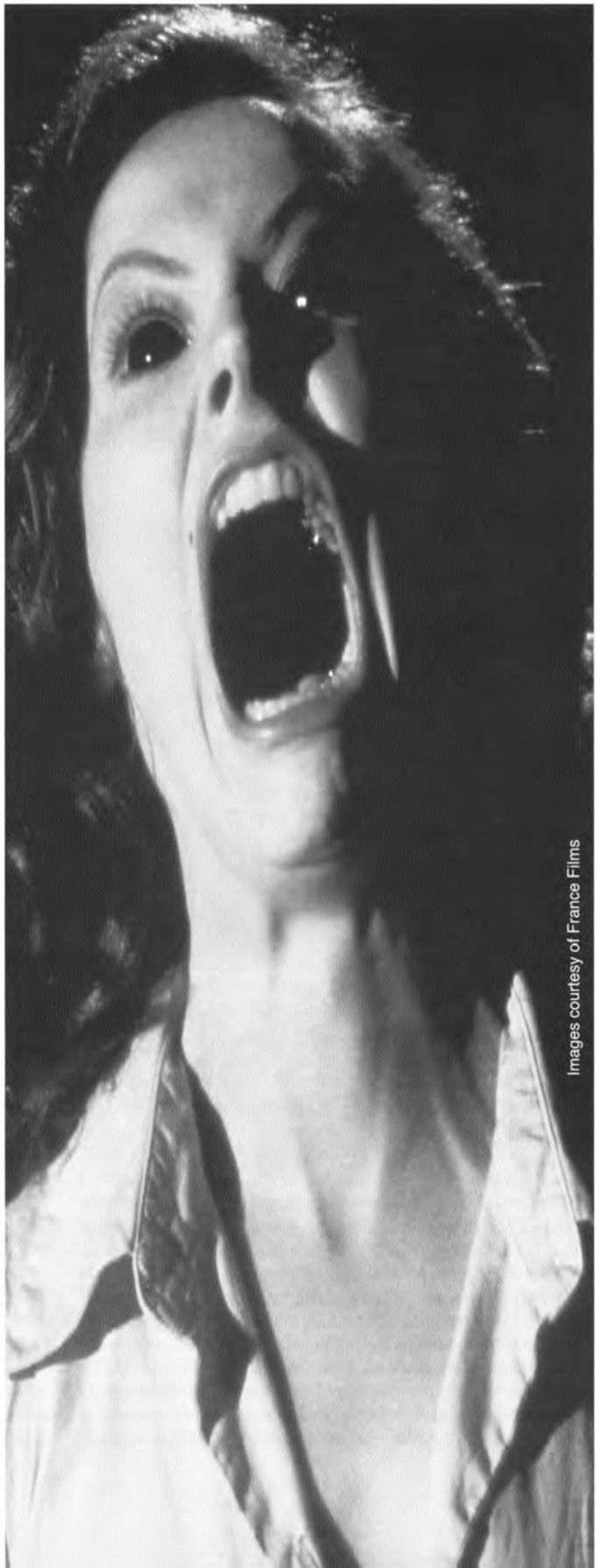
JOHN PAIZ

A TRIBUTE ARTIST REACHES FOR THE TOP

By Mark Peranson

John Paizs is an assimilator of the detritus of popular culture. With his 1985 feature debut *Crime Wave*—ignominiously retitled *The Big Crime Wave* for video to avoid confusion with Sam Raimi's 1986 film *Crimewave*—Paizs established himself as the patron saint of all blocked screenwriters lucky enough to have seen the film. *Crime Wave* was quickly hailed as the funniest Canadian film ever, yet the Winnipeg–born Paizs is the most influential Canadian director you've never heard of. Now he's back with *Top of the Food Chain*, his first feature in 15 years. In a cinematic landscape where value is equated with oppressive quality (e.g., *The Red Violin*), Paizs's midnight–movie–going, crowd–pleasing aesthetic comes with a personal vision.

With a series of kitschy, sitcom–length shorts in the early 1980s—heavily relying on late 1950s, early 1960s iconography—animator–turned–filmmaker Paizs reworked Hemingway's Nick Adams coming–of–age tales. *Springtime in Greenland* (1981), the stoic everyman Nick's debut (followed by *Oak, Ivy and Other Dead Elms* and *The International Style*), was also Canada's first (take a breath) postmodern film. It is a truly hilarious, irony–sweating evocation of the stagnation provided by WASP summer afternoons by the poolside, beer and hot dogs in



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hand. At the same time, it is also a fractured narrative, alternating consumerist ideals with a swaggering competition between moustachioed showoff Corny and the always silent and usually shirtless Nick, played by Paizs. The influence Paizs's work has held on the sexually bizarre and quirky films that followed, from Egoyan to McDonald to Stopkewich, is inestimable. What was distinctive was Paizs's primordial style—crisp, mock-radio sound, no camera movement, mood lighting—showing a debt to low-grade pocketbook covers, instructional films, Technicolor travelogues and even Saturday morning cartoons.

"When I started filmmaking, the films produced by the Winnipeg Film Group were earnest, socially conscious slices of small town Canadiana. I brought a New Wave sensibility to my films." He led the New Wave by old means, best seen in the offbeat, self-conscious Winnipeg Film Group offerings that followed, most notably the wilfully anachronistic efforts of prairie companion, Guy Maddin. Belying its low-budget, amateurish production values, *Crime Wave* is the Film Group's *8 1/2*. It's the story of wannabe "colour crime" writer Steven Penny (played by a silent Paizs) who can write beginnings and endings, but has awful trouble with middles—a frustration captured in the repeated bloody bashing of a character's head on the floor—and his presexual friendship with young Kim (whose parents' garage Steven inhabits). For his happiness, Kim sends Steven to Kansas to study with the psychotic Dr. Jolly to learn how to write "twists."

In a strategy perfected by Hollywood studios (Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon*, for example, lost its first reel following a disastrous test screening), but unheard of in independent filmmaking, Paizs reshot the last reel of *Crime Wave* following negative reaction to its dark ending at Toronto's film festival, adding a *deus ex machina* and satirical, religious revelation. But in a twist for the man who "really wanted to do good," *Crime Wave* was only distributed theatrically in Winnipeg. The second ending—"The top! Only one guy made it!," a *Citizen Kane*—styled newsreel two decades before *Velvet Goldmine*, without the latter's gravity—acts as both Steven Penny's and Paizs's apologias.

"Yes, he [Steven] is very guilty about the joke that he just presented. I really did mean to be good. That echoed my own thoughts precisely," a heftier, humble-to-excess, 40-year-old Paizs says in a halting speech, in Toronto in April for a retrospective of his films at the Cinematheque Ontario, shirt buttoned way up. As Roy Orbison's "In Dreams" plays on a jukebox, he fiddles with the label on his beer bottle, uneasy at the prospect of talking about his old films, and, even more so, his second directorial feature. "I'm super-receptive to what people say about my stuff, and I knew *Crime Wave*'s ending lacked something. I could hear people laughing all the way through the first hour, but then it gets dark and there was silence. I felt the first hour had been so strong that I could remake the last half-hour like it. But there was always a little voice telling me this movie would never be a hit. I always knew it didn't have a story, even if I didn't know why. I knew it wasn't a story in terms of what people think of as a story and I knew it would have been unreal even if it had been a midnight movie. It never became a cult hit, but it really did connect with anyone who has a dream to make it. Everything I got, by way of TV work and *Top of the Food Chain*, is because of *Crime Wave*."

To nobody's surprise, the menacing final "twist" of *Crime Wave*—a reversal of the ending of *The Wizard of Oz* ("there's no place like home") or a variation on Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*—is bizarre even in comparison to the rest of the oddball film, an illustration of male sexual hysteria. It's the flip side of the quiet life above the garage, the other means of differentiating oneself from one's ultra normal surroundings—psychosis. It also brings to mind another artist whose twisted classic Paizs viewed with dumbfounded anger. "*Crime Wave* is set in this *Leave It to Beaver* world, which was the shocking idea in *Blue Velvet*, and one I had already used in *Springtime in Greenland*. But because I was unknown, *Crime Wave* is not part of the mythology. *Blue Velvet* upset me. I was almost finished *Crime Wave* and I'm sitting in the audience watching Lynch's film. Suddenly, there's that white picket fence and the same kind of imagery I was working with. I could not fucking believe it!" *Blue Velvet*'s success, along with Tim Burton's absurdist *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, may even have something to do with the failure of *Crime Wave* as some critics unfairly wrote Paizs off as an imitator.

But where Lynch uses irony, and the macabre and combines the mundane to reveal the former's perpetual

Paizs overlooks his set for *Top of the Food Chain*.

containment within the latter, Paizs uses the banal to contain the macabre and the comical, exposing his acknowledged influence—John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*, *Hairspray*). Paizs refuses to be as remote as Lynch. Instead, he situates himself as a consumer, concerned above all whether or not the audience will get *and* enjoy his films. I can't think of another Canadian director who speaks in these terms. "I've never consciously endeavoured to prove I'm smarter than the viewer. In fact, the very thought of it brings me nightmares. I simply endeavour to present to the viewer references that I hope they will dig. In fact, that could be extended to cover my entire philosophy of filmmaking."

Unlike both Lynch and Guy Maddin, Paizs is self-conscious without being self-important. "Making films, I work completely instinctively. I never analyze what I'm doing and only look and ask if it's funny. I see myself as a maker of comedies. I don't imagine a comedian analyzes his one-liners.

Doing *Top of the Food Chain*, I was receptive to all ideas and tried to decide whether or not they were working. There's a consistency to what I do, and a certain something at work. I feel there is, but I've never felt the need to figure out what makes it work or informs it."

After the commercial failure of *Crime Wave*, Paizs almost directed *Perfectly Normal* (which was eventually directed by Yves Simoneau), worked in television on *The Kids in the Hall* series, *Once a Thief* and *Maniac Mansion* and shot music videos for Tom Jackson and the comedy troupe, The Vacant Lot. At a low point in fall of 1994, after a film called *House Guest* fell through, he sold window-washing services door-to-door. About the only thing the director—who now makes a living as a graphic designer in Winnipeg—did not do was make another feature. "The basic problem was that I decided not to use my silent man character any more, and it proved to be an insurmountable challenge to find something to replace him. The character was my point of view. This person, who never talked, at the centre of the narrative forced things into a certain perspective. Nothing that I could come up with was as good, or as personal or unique. I was waiting for something perfect. I became obsessed with it. [film critic] Jay Scott said that if the great Canadian comedy is going to be made, I was going to be the one to do it."

After seeing those he influenced prosper, one can hardly fault Paizs for accepting something less than perfect, a project where he must answer to writers and producers. *Top of the Food Chain* finds Paizs working with a script combining pastiche with parody. It was written by Phil Berard and Larry Lalonde as a liberal mixture of *War of the Worlds*, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and George Romero's Zombie films (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*), but directed as a playfully paranoid B-movie rendition of Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. With equal doses of sexual schizophrenia and social commentary, Paizs again deconstructs by foregrounding the form. But what's new this time is the subversion of types—the scientist, the gracious and inert female, steady establishment figures, a truth-telling madman and mysterious strangers—and their fossilized values. *Top of the Food Chain* is actually in the proud tradition of Canadian TV sketch comedy. Like a good pop record, its enjoyability increases with familiarity.

Of Paizs's short films, the frozen fantasy of *The International Style* (1983) seems most relevant when approaching *Food Chain*. That warped how-to primer for making a postmodern conspiracy film showed a tribute artist trying for pastiche. The short vanished after unenthusiastic reviews highlighted its insularity and disproportionate reliance on style, but it was a harbinger of the current obsession with regurgitation. His sense of familiarity combined with parody proves Paizs is not a pastiche artist like Lynch, Tarantino or the rest of the ironic postmodernist brood, but, like Waters, a tribute artist. "I'd much prefer to call myself a tribute artist," says Paizs. "Pastiche artist to me sounds like you're trying to hide that you're copying. I'm proud I'm copying and I want people to know I'm copying because I'm doing it in an original way. I'm talking about me through copying films that don't have anything to do with


Fiona Loewi

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me, that'd be exactly the same whether I existed or not. So I'm copying them but I'm also making them into something they never were."

Which leads to *Top of the Food Chain*. In the Western Central Northeast, above the town of Exceptional Vista, stand two impotent twin peaks—an abandoned church steeple and a TV antenna resembling the old RKO Radio tower. The town has ceased to function—finally fizzled out with the comet-like landing of foraging alien cannibals. A direct dissolve links the tower to the boarded-up church, conflating the two—the former the preeminent postmodern substitute for the latter. Cut to a statue-like man fishing, eyes glued to a TV set, as he watches a fishing show while a fish flutters in the river behind him, a hook in its lip. The townsfolk live in a time capsule with 1950s accoutrements, while nighttime exteriors take on the frozen colonial atmosphere of Grant Wood paintings. As Paizs notes, "That's why they asked me to direct in the first place. They wanted a world where the placemats in the restaurant gas stations had illustrations with big boulders and tee pees. What if American roadside culture came alive? How surreal that would be?"

Exceptional Vista is a camp town with "reception" problems where the characters have their own theme songs—which they sing to themselves—and where the aliens are aggressive mirrors of the townsfolk's instability. They prey on their attachment to sex which, along with TV and fishing, are their defining obsession. An atomic scientist, Karel (Campbell Scott), arrives to save the town. He could be someone on vacation from *The International Style*—a pipe-sporting fetishist with a plastic doll of himself who "dreams of science and how it will save mankind." All the "normal" people have vacated for higher ground with the closing of the nut factory, and the remaining men become babbling fools at the sight of a beautiful woman. Sexual confusion is prevalent, from the twisting of male and female names (except the decidedly masculine "Guy") to their socially awkward behaviour. Innkeepers Guy (Tom Everett Scott) and sexpot Sandy Fawkes (Fiona Loewi) twist tongues despite being brother and sister, orphaned in a nut accident. Octogenarian Mayor Claire experiments with both sexes.

Despite the absence of normalcy, men are clearly at the top, possessing all of the town's positions of power in spite of their total incompetence. As an "expert," Karel manhandles the mystery—although he's more accustomed to play-acting than interacting with members of the opposite sex. (When Sandy asks him to hold her he grabs her face, then fetches a new pair of pants.) The untrained Officer Gayle parades around town in his souped-up police Chevy, using his uniform to wrangle the ladies. He's a grown-up version of *Springtime in Greenland*'s smiling male taunter. As Karel, in his usual inane badinage, notes: "Nowhere are a community's moral standards more keenly observed than in its officers of the law." When the extent of the panic has made itself known, Karel enunciates, tight-lipped and tight-assed: "We have to be men. [pause] Above all, we have to be men." The more the atomic scientist from the Atomic Science Institute—all bluster and cravat—opens his mouth, the more his words fail to make sense. In this way, Paizs has found the answer to the Silent Man dilemma, as Scott hits all beats as the unflappable Karel. In the screwball action climax, Karel, obstructed in his attempt to initiate his plan of "cool fusion," tries to fend off zombies by launching into an impromptu Hinterland Who's Who, instead of playing the hero. Sandy, above, on the roof, subdues alien leader Michelle O'Shea with a punch, only after he has shed his skin.

What follows is a thematically solid conclusion—a full-scale resurrection of the deserted town due to the efforts of the alchemist women who, all the while, have been acting in another movie. There's also a reconstruction in the skewed form of a three-way marriage. Sandy becomes bride of Karel *and* her own brother, with whom Karel earlier experienced the film's only tender moment. Far from a meaningless gag, this ending predetermines the town's rebirth. For Exceptional Vista to persist, children—conspicuously absent—are needed. One imagines the oblivious Sandy sleeping not with Karel but with Guy and Guy with Karel. (Or else the doll.) As if there still might be a chance Karel could assume the role of sexual predator, in the isolated farmhouse sequence he puts Michelle's toothpick in his mouth, then spits it out. Karel's entering into the marriage is sacrificial, for the sake of the community.

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But what about alien cannibals? Says Karel, "We're dealing with a species almost as intelligent as our own." Their structure seems to consist of an aggressive male leader and, in the climax, mindless, zombie-like followers. Paizs accentuates their masculinity with the effusive ejaculation of a blue liquid as a sex substitute. About all that separates the town people from the aliens, besides superior intelligence, is television, and its accompanying passivity. In the end, television strikes the aliens down with the aid of a Smilin' Jesus, *deus ex machina*, again. To replay a broken record, the metaphorical backbone of 1950s sci-fi paranoia came from the threat of the Russkies. Is it a stretch to see the Red Menace represented by a spectrum of Red, White and Blue? Critic Geoff Pevere argued in 1985, at a time of greater public paranoia regarding American cultural hegemony, that Paizs's shorts proved him to be "a regurgitator and ironic commentator on the phenomenon of subconscious infiltration by an alien ideology." If the masculine aliens are Americans—where the United States is the mainstream—then there could be no more ironic crippling device than the agent of their own mind control.

This reading makes *Top of the Food Chain* the first Canuck statement against American invasion credulous when compared to *Independence Day*. The functional definition of Jamesonian pastiche, the film is a corporate, patriarchal Frankenstein's monster of American patriotism, complete with subtext of an ineffective man becoming a kick-ass president. Compare this to Karel's ironic proclamation: "When our government is in charge, no harm will come of us." In *Independence Day*, the computer virus saving mankind is created by Jeff Goldblum. In contrast, *Top of the Food Chain* exhibits absolute disdain in science, or mankind's ability for self-preservation. Aliens aside, *Food Chain* is Canada's two-dollar version of the likewise adolescent, parody-

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plus, *Mars Attacks!*. And like Burton, a tribute artist aching to come out (see *Ed Wood*), Paizs has an affinity for bottom feeders, those who leaders rely on to achieve and maintain power, yet deem local yokels.

When I asked Paizs if *Top of the Food Chain* warns against American cultural imperialism, his response was telling. "Is there a Canadian culture that is distinct to begin with? Certainly in my life, growing up, I never watched whatever there was supposed to be Canadian. The only Canadian culture from TV that I knew about was *Don Messer's Jubilee*, and that was a total joke. I completely unselfconsciously took and absorbed everything from the States. It never worried me. Maybe it's because I'm the son of Hungarian immigrants. I sang God Save the Queen in the morning and O Canada in the afternoon, and then I went home and heard Hungarian. I grew up in the North End of Winnipeg, the melting pot. I remember entering the first WASP household as a kid thinking I was in an alien world. The father wore slippers and everything was so neat. I always felt outside."

Paizs is describing the alien world encapsulated in *Springtime in Greenland*, a world I can't imagine living in, even though I know it exists. This sense of living outside of mainstream culture earlier drove artists to retreat inward, philosophically or spiritually. Regurgitating and reacting to the material of his youth impels Paizs's work; his ambivalence comes with the predictable refusal to see this all-encompassing alien world as something escapable. What's best, as *Top of the Food Chain* suggests, is adapting. "On my street my friends and I had a superhero club. We protected the younger kids on the block from the supervillains who'd beat them up. We also played the supervillains." There's no place like home.

If one follows Pevere and sees Paizs exhibiting a cultural schizophrenia characterized by simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the United States, one might be tempted to infer this as the source of *Food Chain*'s sexual schizophrenia and be likewise tempted to diagnose the general impotence as caused by that emasculating Southern entity. Paizs's discomfort, however, is not to something American, but to normal life in general, with its never-ending parade of oft-meaningless images. There's no political anxiety to his influences—making Paizs the prototypical postmodernist, even more so than John Waters, whose idealistic, humanist politics scream: "Why can't we all get along?" And just as only 1950s America could have produced a John Waters, only 1950s Canada could have produced John Paizs, who—ironically enough—stands as our most American filmmaker. •

Campbell Scott as the atomic scientist Dr. Karel Lamonte