



John Turturro

Photos courtesy of Seville Pictures

Mr. D. Takes a Prarfal

Arto Paragamian's Two Thousand and None

By Maurie Alioff

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.

John Donne, *Holy Sonnet X*



In countless films of all genres, death lurks, strikes, then recedes into the shadows. If you want to get fancy, you could say that our mortality is the haunting subtext of all movies, given their vivid illusions of eternal life on the one hand and jolting reminders of inevitable decay on the other. When you watch *Some Like it Hot* or *Rebel Without a Cause*, Marilyn and Jimmy sparkle with life. But in *What Lies Beneath*, age has drained some of the lustre out of Michelle Pfeiffer's feline beauty.

When a picture is mainly about death, its mood goes for tear-jerking schmaltz (*Autumn in New York*, *Love Story*), or sombre reverence (*The Seventh Seal*). For the ancient Greeks, Thanatos was a semi-divinity. Maybe the hushed, funereal tone of films like *Vertigo*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Kissed* or the 1930s fantasy *Death Takes a Holiday* (remade as *Meet Joe Black* with Brad Pitt playing you know who) is a remnant of that worshipful posture.

Once Montreal writer/director Arto Paragamian decided he wanted to confront the subject of everyone's final destination, he was determined to steer clear of both sentimentality and solemnity. *Two Thousand and None*, the 35-year-old filmmaker's new picture about a dying man, flags his intentions. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* was an epic movie that envisioned dying as part of an awesome cosmic plan. In his black comedy, Paragamian gets closer in spirit to Woody Allen, even the Farrelly brothers, than Kubrick or Ingmar Bergman. At one point, after the doomed protagonist enjoys bathroom sex with a horny young lady, he hides behind the shower curtain when someone rushes in to use the toilet.

Paragamian's fondness for sight gags and slapstick in a film about a guy with a month to live reminds me of a famous scene in the 1960s farce, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. Jimmy Durante, dying of his wounds in the aftermath of a car crash, literally kicks a bucket before he expires. It's a cocky moment that says to death, "you don't scare me, pompous fool." In another era, John Donne, the 17th-century English

metaphysical poet, showed the same bravado when he personified Mr. D. as an inept creep and unsavoury low-life who "dost with poison, war and sickness dwell." On top of taking the solemnity out of death, Paragamian told me on a rainy day when the Toronto International Film Festival screened his film, "in our modern life, when death comes, we tend to naturalize it, get rid of it, get it out of the house, take it to the hospital, whatever. I don't think it was like that a 100 years ago."

The anti-hero of *Two Thousand and None* is Benjamin Kasparian (John Turturro in a casting coup), a self-absorbed, anal-retentive academic who can't understand why his wife Amanda (played by Turturro's real-life spouse Katherine Borowitz) gets upset about their divorce. "You wanted to get married, and we got married," he tells her just after leaving the lawyer's office. "You wanted to get divorced, and we got divorced. What's the problem?" Benjamin then discovers he's actually got a major

problem – a weird and incurable disease. The emotionless intellectual's brain is expanding rapidly and he'll be dead in a month. On top of this irony, Benjamin happens to be a paleontologist who just made the discovery of his career. In the film's first act, he digs up a fossil then is told he's in the process of becoming one.

Paragamian is the kind of sharp-witted guy who is perpetually amused by the game of life's nutty rules. In *Because Why*, his award-winning debut feature, the film's main character is, what novelist Thomas Pynchon called, a human yo-yo. During *Because Why*'s opening sequence, Alex (Michael Riley) returns from years of travelling that don't seem to have made an impression on him, other than an urge to keep moving. An accident-prone klutz, he pedals bicycles into car doors, strolls into lampposts and shows no signs of ambition, other than a sudden impulse to have kids (even though he rejects an attractive neighbour with two). As the story develops, Paragamian invites the audience to both laugh at and empathize with this sweet-natured goof. For reasons ranging from economic to metaphysical, Alex finds little sense in the world.

By contrast, in *Two Thousand and None* Turturro's Benjamin is a careerist whose work means everything to him until he is compelled to face the void, and for Paragamian, the terminally ill yuppie had to be a paleontologist, rather than a stock market trader or a dot-com entrepreneur. Mortality "is what Benjamin's life is all about," Paragamian told me. "Paleontology is about studying death, traces of death, millions and millions of years of death. That's what nature is all about: death, death, death, death all the time." Chuckling at his ghoulish riff, Paragamian responded to my request for a little more character analysis. "Who is Benjamin? Is he me? Is that what you're asking? At this stage in my life I have one main source to pull from and that would be my own experience. Does the character reflect me? In certain ways, yes, but not entirely."

An Armenian-Canadian, Paragamian studied illustration and design before being accepted into Concordia University's film

program. In 1987, he won the Canadian Student Film Festival's Norman McLaren Award for best movie, *The Fish Story*, and then caused a stir in 1988 by taking the prize again for *Across the Street*. He is the only person to have won the award two years in a row. Between *Because Why* and his latest feature, Paragamian joined Denis Villeneuve, Manon Briand, André Turpin, Jennifer Alleyn and Marie-Julie Dallaire on producer Roger Frappier's anthology project, *Cosmos*.

Intended by Frappier as a vehicle to develop fresh talent, the 1997 release is a set of black-and-white urban short stories, linked by a reappearing Greek taxi driver named Cosmos. Paragamian's contribution is the picture's final episode. In it, the cabbie and a friend sit in a greasy spoon debating the latter's theory that the invention of agriculture was the worst thing that ever happened to the human race. As the argument escalates, a couple of bank robbers steal Cosmos's taxi, and the film segues into a Keystone Kops chase that climaxes in a barren, rocky landscape not unlike the opening setting of *Two Thousand and None*.

While the other *Cosmos* stories (particularly Villeneuve's) indulge in flamboyant camera and lightning techniques, Paragamian's mingles simple set-ups and deadpan humour recalling Jim Jarmusch's and Aki Kaurismäki's films. As with *Because Why*, it is loaded with the kind of dryly funny moments of blank stares and awkward gestures Jarmusch and Kaurismäki favour. At the same time, the short occasionally bursts into rapid-fire montages and frenzied action. While Paragamian acknowledges a debt to Jarmusch, he's not the kind of filmmaker who analyzes his technique, or obsesses over finding the optimum method. When it comes to writing, for instance, he says, "I try to keep it organic. I jump in and write a scene. I write two scenes around it. I listen to music; I make drawings sometimes; I live it. Of course, there's the more structural work, which comes after I've built up a certain amount of material. Some of it gets thrown out. Some of it stays."

As for his cool, ironic perspective, Paragamian believes it originates with his Armenian background, which gives him "the sense of having a critical distance from North American culture. I see it through the eyes of someone who knows another culture, and that critical distance is very useful in the creative realm. I think that it gives more resolution, more depth to what you're looking at." Like Paragamian, Benjamin Kasparian draws inspiration from his origins. Early in the movie, his dead parents appear to him, bickering as they did in life. They ask him, "Dead, alive, what's the difference?" Reminding him of the cosmic insignificance of his passing and pleased with their "good, solid death," they advise him to take advantage of the freedom his imminent demise grants him. Also like Paragamian, Benjamin jumps in and ad libs ideas for his final days. These include a sexual encounter involving the bathroom girl and a hangman's rope, not to mention a crackpot scheme to return his parents' bones to Armenia. Meanwhile, he ties up loose ends with Amanda and his best friends, while being jolted by memories, which appear as film projections in coffee cups and on the sides of buildings.

Paragamian "knew for sure that Benjamin needed to be played by someone who had an enormous amount of intensity." While Stanley Tucci was briefly considered, John Turturro quickly emerged as "the best choice. I don't know all the details as to how it happened, but he received a script, liked it and that was the end of the story." But how do you build a distinctive on-screen character when he's played by an actor responsible for a gallery of unforgettable roles such as the enraged bigot in *Do the Right Thing* and the put-upon aspiring writer in *Barton Fink*? "Working with a known persona was something I had never done before," Paragamian recalled. "It was all discovery

for me, and I had no way of really preparing myself." In the end, Benjamin came into being through a process of collaboration with an actor who is himself a devoted moviemaker.

"John has colossal focus. He can stick with it for hours and hours and hours. When you're doing shots of characters other than him, he's there behind the camera for the eye line. A typical star says, 'I'm going to my trailer, see you later.' He really cares about film." As for Turturro's reputation for being a

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stickler for details, "John has very strong opinions about things. That's his way. What are you gonna do, argue with him? But it was never about his ego. It's all about the film, and I have to say he never, never confronted the script. He loved it and he would remind me, 'That's not what you've written.'"

Two Thousand and None, a film about facing death in an increasingly mind-centred era, deals inevitably with the awakening of emotions. Benjamin's crisis sabotages the ironic distance from life he and his big-brained pals cocoon themselves in. "If you bury your feelings," Paragamian said near the end of our interview, "you bury them alive and you're gonna pay. Because life is a system, an organic system, a biological system and if you try to suppress your feelings – and this is true for all humanity – they will mutate and you have to pay. There's no way out. You have to pay." But, of course, Paragamian insists on a clear separation between genuine feelings and weepy sentimentality. In Toronto, one of the city's entertainment weeklies referred to *Two Thousand and None* as "pathologically unsentimental." Paragamian cackles at the thought. "That was perfect, a perfect description. Finally, someone understands me." ●

Katherine Borowitz

