

## THE LONG AND THE TALL OF IT

a review by Gerald Saul

Does Brett Carson Bell watch TV?

Yes. Brett does watch TV. He watched it when he was a kid, he watched it as he grew up, he watches it now. So what? That describes most people I know, what makes Brett any different?

Brett seems to be driven to understand the television medium. The same medium which taught, mesmerized, entertained, controlled and warped him and his/our generation. It has made its way into every thought we have and every judgement we make. Brett has been exploring the process and effects of media, by creating his own version of the type of programs he remembers being influenced by. His newest film, FRED, explores not only genre (the melodrama, among others) but also the effect of television on the morality and mentality of its viewers.

Brett introduced FRED to me as "a cosmic joke". The joke stems from the structure of the tv melodrama which seems to be without beginning or ending (ambiguous endings). It is a very frustrating genre because it is too close to reality to be dramatic, and too close to TV to be real.

When cinema originated, many people felt its heritage lay in the need to reproduce reality. The acceptance (by the public) of the addition of sound and colour only reconfirmed this theory. Colours became more realistic, sound grew less flawed, lighting more natural. However, technical progress (form) cannot be so easily separated from storytelling (content) when speaking of a movement towards realism. TV is made by people who grew up with TV (which is made by people who grew up with movies made by people who grew up with movies). These people (the writers and directors and actors), unlike their toys (the cameras and film stock and tape recorders), have NOT been moving towards this dream of the reality-cinema. Instead, each generation has been basing their views of romance, heroics and justice on the movies and TV they watch. As a result, the content of the medium has been moving steadily away from realism, into its own abstracted realm.

In other art forms, this process of evolution; one generation basing its work on the last, creating variations upon variations of a theme, is looked upon as a tradition. Filmmakers frequently hide behind the word 'homage' and are hesitant to admit to being part of a tradition. They should, instead, make note of the tradition and at the same time, dismiss the antiquated notion of reality being cinema's heritage.

Brett has attempted to explore part of cinema's true heritage; the melodrama.

FRED follows its title character through the absurdist events following his accepting a promotion he did not deserve (an injustice). Fred is a stereotypical (a favourite of the melodrama) businessman; insensitive to people around him and self absorbed in his own success. This injustice is immediately clear to the viewers (who are melodrama-literate) but not to Fred. Pathos sets in, but as well as the elements of nature reacting, Fred's own environment (society) does. Cinema often treats the human race as a mindless, uncontrollable force (like nature) as in cases of a protagonist challenging 'the angry mob'.

Before the climax of conflict, Fred's melodrama continues in a closed environment (Saskatchewan?).

While the rest of the world falls into chaos, Fred is only able to discover his fault through watching the television. Again, Brett is poking fun at our tendency to only believe something to be important when we see it on (American) television.

Isolated within their house (by weather and society), the (non) relationship between Fred and his wife is portrayed. In the spirit of Stanley Kubrick (especially 2001, A Space Odyssey), the conversations are banal and trivial. The characters seem to have nothing to say to each other.

Though not implied in the film, the decline of the art of conversation is frequently attributed to lack of practice due to the watching of TV. With dialogue being the key to modern drama, this is further evidence that 'real people' have no place on TV.

Aside from the beginning and the end of the film, Fred's only direct contact with the outside world is with the Milkman. Milkmen are pop culture icons, the ever smiling, traditional (cliché) 'friend' to every housewife (and enemy to every husband?). This Milkman is an eerie character with a benign smile, seemingly gifted with an unearthly wisdom and knowledge. He would represent the devil, or more fitting for this genre, Fate (to know the future in a story structure which precludes endings is the next best thing to Satanism).

It is regrettable that Brett did not designate more time to the family melodrama instead of jumping quickly to the 'action'. Brett dispenses with the female character (she is killed by an arrow (phallic)), freeing Fred from her (albeit limited) sensibilities and allowing him to pick up arms. From this point on, it's just boys fighting boys. Fred no longer has a goal. He has no friends, no family and his job is the source of all his hardship, but still he must follow the path screenwriters around the world have written for him and characters like him.

Fred is at once 'the enemy among us' (conspiracy/cold war films of the 60's and 70's) and the underdog, non conformist (the only person in the world not driven mad). The people around Fred have targeted him (guided by messages on TV, the only voice anyone really listens to) as the source of all trouble in the world. Hollywood has always loved this easy solution; that 'evil', be it drugs, crime or communism, can be conquered by defeating one person at its source. This gives way for the development of extraordinary heroes.

The 'hero' in FRED is the Milkman, who shifts from his role of seer, to that of antagonist and warrior. This transition, though lacking any justification, feels completely natural, because the Milkman was so intimidating earlier ("I'm the God Damn Milkman").

Overall, FRED makes some interesting observations of media and the role it has had in shaping our view of storytelling, justice and violence. However, the film does lack focus as it tries to challenge and mimic too many genres at once.

Brett feels his exploration focusing on media, and the personal purging of it he has needed to do, is nearing its end. His future investigations will be character based, as opposed to structurally based, and will dabble in gender relations in the cinema.