

# The Projector

The Projector  
by M. Vaughn-James  
Coach House Press, Toronto  
\$7.95, Hardcover

A friend who is familiar with Vaughn-James has commented that in publishing this review I may be limiting the experience of someone who has not yet read the book, but who will be motivated to do so by seeing the pictures which accompany this review; O.K., that's fair enough: if you've really been cranked up by the pictures shown here, stop right now and get a copy of the book and read it before you go on. This is simply *my* analysis of what happened in *The Projector* and represents only a small part of what any individual reader might find therein, for reasons which will be obvious if you read it. (Now that your curiosity has been hopelessly aroused, ...)

Coach House Press did not send a copy of this book to The Gateway for review purposes, but the book is just too good to go un-noticed, and therefore it looks as if they will get a "freebie" this time. It is the sort of book one might pass up in a bookstore, but once you got past the second page, most people would be compelled to buy it. It's *that* good.

Martin Vaughn-James is a cartoon artist, but don't compare him with the faceless hacks who turn out much of the bad cartooning seen in the underground papers today. Vaughn-James has been published regularly in *Saturday Night* magazine, and his earlier extended work, *Elephant* (new press, 1969) was a minor masterpiece. His chief protagonist is a small, rumped man in a suit and eyeglasses who functions as a sort of Everyman; on one level the action in *The Projector* takes up where the *Elephant* left off, however here the basic pessimism of that earlier work gives way to the possibility of an escape from the meaningless routine in which "Mister Eyeglasses" was trapped at the conclusion of that book.

Vaughn-James sees man as the victim of his lack of understanding of what he sees. We have all experienced unexplainable bouts of *deja vu*, seemingly meaningless repetition of events in our everyday lives, sequences of events which would almost make a discernable pattern if only we could see the whole spectrum of past, present and future at once. One could easily argue that the entire action portrayed in *Projector* takes place in the "real time" required for a man to walk past an open gate, yet in the book there is a story of a civilization taken over by the machines which it has used to replace human beings; a story of futile infighting in a monstrous business world; a story of the decline and regeneration of a society which attaches more value to huge cities than to the people who populate them, and much more.

The book is divided into a "prologue" and three sections. In the prologue, we are given an allegory: the geographic setting is probably Toronto, though it may be any city anywhere on earth; a narrator places "you" on a street, carrying a suitcase and a pair of scissors, and a horseman, bound with ropes and covered with what appear to be sheets, bursts out of an abandoned greenhouse which

"you" have just passed, on your way through a gate. The horseman seems to represent imagination, a quality which is dying in many of us as a result of our constant dealing with the material, "realistic" world. The horseman falls from the top of a high building, and "you" - or at least your suitcase - falls.

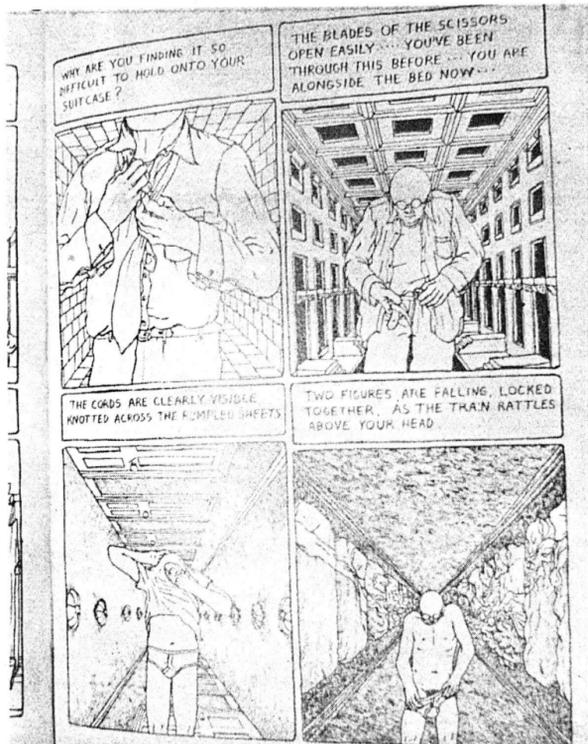
The suitcase falls into a group of pigs, mean, vicious animals who are arguing over whether or not they should keep the umbrella which they are holding. They probably represent man as he is at his unimaginative worst, and of course when they find the suitcase contains a picture of the bound horseman, they try to destroy it with their scissors.

The first passage of the book is titled "Fat on the Brain", and it is here that the character I have named "Mr. Eyeglasses" appears. He is seen getting up and getting ready to leave for work, and the technique is what one could only call "stream-of-consciousness". Vaughn-James intersperses pictures of Mr. Eyeglasses with scenes which will re-appear later in the story, and these sink into one's subconscious only to surface later when they re-appear, giving a sense of past/present/future in a single instant. Mr. Eyeglasses goes on his way to work in his car, travelling along a road lined with consumer goods, and he eventually arrives at a huge slide projector on the middle of a barren plain. The projector is Vaughn-James' metaphor for the

newspeak about their lives. A couple of subway guards come in and blast him with a shotgun, and across the tracks the commuters just continue talking, not seeing or caring one way or the other.

Mr. Eyeglasses starts to turn into a dog himself, after attending a party where all the guests are talking and no-one is listening. His problem is that he still *feels*, and thus his metamorphosis from human being to dog is erratic. He sees an advertisement for a number of things which might relieve him: he could get a "completely automatic, pre-programmed flush-action fatfilter mind", or he could drop some "Nofeel" tablets which are reputed to "feel like nothing else, because they feel like nothing." But as the party degenerates into a chaotic brawl with people who are part machines, part humans cutting away at each others' suitcases - which contain, remember, imagination - he escapes the projector, and starts on a new trip.

In the second passage, "Scythes in the Night", the dog/man approaches the city, which is now in ruins. Windows are open, grass grows in the streets, and the suitcase is falling toward him from the top of the ruined skyscraper. He is able to see the future as it will be if men continue to live for materialism alone, and thus, when the bound horseman appears again he wrestles with him, stripping him as the two of them fall through



subway train that takes all the uptight little businessmen away into the city where "life" takes place, where they work in meat factories which he shows as being run by dogs in men's clothing. Those who dissent are done away with, as one incredible scene shows: a bum is standing alone on the far side of the subway tracks in the station, and he begins to shout warnings to the identical massed figures waiting for the train on the other side. "You're waiting for the wrong train!" he shouts, "You're all on the wrong platform!" he yells, as they continue talking in a sort of

space into a world where the monuments of typewriters and abandoned buildings give evidence of a sort of ultimate degeneration of human values, and where, at the end of the passage, he finds that the projectors have become all-powerful.

In the final passage, "Sprintime in the Overcoat Pit", Mr. Eyeglasses considers the alternative to escaping from the projector. He becomes "part of the problem", works hard, beats down his fellow humans (while the pigs stand around and applaud), and Vaughn-James shows us several areas in which



modern man fights his day-to-day battles. The business world is depicted as a sort of race on wheelless bicycles, in which the contestants are armed with squash rackets. Politics is represented by a race on dune buggies, with the drivers mounted on toilet seats. In the world of finance, the men are employed throwing shit into cash registers, and academia is depicted as a battle in which scholars mount upon the backs of black-robed priests and throw books at one another. Mr. Eyeglasses excels in all these fields, and ultimately, his nose looking more like a snout all the time, he is given a seat inside the projector/subway train, emblematic of success in an inhuman world.

But Mr. Eyeglasses has not sold out. While he has been undergoing his trial by ordeal, the bound man has been riding down a road through a countryside becoming more and more ruined by the passage of time. Vaughn-James appears to be saying that even when men weaken, imagination may enable them to salvage themselves if they remember the lessons of the past and apply them freely in the future. Mr. Eyeglasses begins a heavy journey through the past: he sees the ruined earth he passed through on his way to the subway station, the billboard/consumer products available on the roadside, the man shot in the subway station, the inhumanity of the "meat-factory" in which he works. He takes his suitcase, and plants it in the projector - somehow suitably, on the toilet, and blows the whole thing up. The other projectors pin him in their lights: he may be doomed, but at least he has made a defiant gesture.

Mr. Eyeglasses has become a revolutionary, but Vaughn-James is careful to show us that he is a *real* one, not simply a game-player. He leaves the business of the world behind, with its tightassed inhabitants. He leaps over the fence at the subway station and, passing a ruined, wrapped-up projector, gets on a *real* train. There are other "revolutionaries" on the train, balling, smoking hash and dressed in patched jeans; they are all singing "We're leaping off! We're leaving it behind!" but as he quietly reminds them, "You're still on board." He begins to take positive action, unpacking the useless stuffed owls, pens, and glass jugs which he has been carrying, and

shouting "YES!" he leaps from the train.

He falls away, over the side of a bridge. But this time he carries no suitcase, since he is one with his imagination, open, accepting experience without reserve. In a remarkable, joyous, fantastically optimistic series of drawings, Vaughn-James shows us the unfolding of a possible civilization in which *nothing* is recognizable as being "our" world, and yet in which there seems to be a harmony and beauty that has become absent in our structured world.

The book ends in a sort of coda, in which "you" are placed back on the street again, just where the whole thing began. Except that now Mr. Eyeglasses is shown on the street. Nothing has changed, Vaughn-James is saying. The possibility has always been there, as long as the imagination is not completely dead.

The writer who comes to mind most often when one is reading *Projector* is James Joyce. In fact, a generation of students who have grown up with comic books and television would probably find Vaughn-James novel an excellent introduction to much of modern written literature, including Joyce, William Faulkner and others such as Leonard Cohen, who employ much the same technique of supplying points of perspective on a single event in such a way that each reader must become involved with the *total* "story" and supply a perspective of his own if the work is to be understood. If the extent to which a reader is required to interact with a work of art, be it literature, painting or a motion picture is an indication of how "good" or effective that work is, then *The Projector* must rate very high indeed. No reader could possibly remain passive when faced with the reality which Vaughn-James has managed to capture (though "capture" is probably the wrong word, since it implies a static which is certainly not there).

Vaughn-James is supposed to be working on another "experimental" novel in the same line as *The Projector*. I for one can't wait to experience it...

By Sid Stephen