

# HIGH

a Larry Kent film

## Review:

By JOHN STILL

On the evening of October 20th., amidst controversial excitement, Dal students witnessed the Canadian premiere of a highly tropical film.

High, written and directed by Larry Kent, plunged the viewer into a self-destructive kingdom of pleasure. Fast moving objects, flitting shadowy forms, psychedelic music with the persistent refrain of "try to leave your mind far behind!", then a sudden switch into mellow, wavy colour for the credits cleverly set the tone for the loveless sex scenes that follow. For ninety minutes the film moves through related environments: bedroom, restaurant, coffee-house, dance-floor, and through a hundred-odd versions of vanity fair filmed in Montreal and Toronto, relentlessly on to the climax of ritual murder in a lush Laurentian wilderness. At first there seems to be no story . . . of course there's not meant to be, one concludes, the point is that hippy life can't give rise to any story; it's fragmentary and pointless. But one concludes wrongly. With disconcerting suddenness the director proceeds to telescope and develop a uniquely central relationship. Soon the film's opening scenes fall into a kind of sequential pattern.

The shift occurs when the whacky anti-hero, an ex-university student and freewheeling hedonist, plumps for a single girl. Previously, he had been a complete outsider, a free agent, living communally with other hippies, and enjoying two or three girls or as many as there were to be had. Now, the woman he falls for is initially an innocent. Brief shots indicate that she works for her living as a Westmount librarian, and has presumably confined herself to a quiet, middle class existence. The hippy hero suddenly awakens her hunger for sensation. In what are some of the most technically accomplished sequences in the film we see her mindlessly awash in a whirling-dervish world; and everything is adrift with her. Intensely primitive colours dissolve and re-create themselves at every new moment. Electronic sound co-operates with the wild colour so as to undermine any border line or mental distinction, until finally the unconscious instincts triumph.

Once initiated, the woman gradually overthrows her ethical, social and natural values. She mercilessly enslaves her initiator who is unconscious of his degradation and of his vain attempts to move in an opposite direction towards a self reliant reason.

Thus the man's story, and the progress of his psyche moves contrapuntally to the woman's. This movement tended to be rather jerky and mechanical, as if the director had left a bare diagram, and had failed to give it flesh and blood reality. No great emotional tension was aroused in the viewer. I wonder whether Larry Kent consistently found the right kind of image the human action to reverberate underpin the idea he was showing. For example, the woman's final desertion of her servile lover, when she robs him of everything that he has stolen for her, is the film's ultimate "high"; and yet it left me coolly indifferent. A journalist couldn't have treated the event with more distance or objective detachment. I missed a committed point of view. What should one feel? Loss, anger, pity, hatred? Larry Kent would have a very definite answer for this kind of quaint bewilderment; his job, he'd tell you, is simply to give you the story. You're bright enough to do your own evaluating. These times are sophisticated. You're free to make what you want of these images of self-destruction. I just give you them: straight, accurately observed, and unadorned.

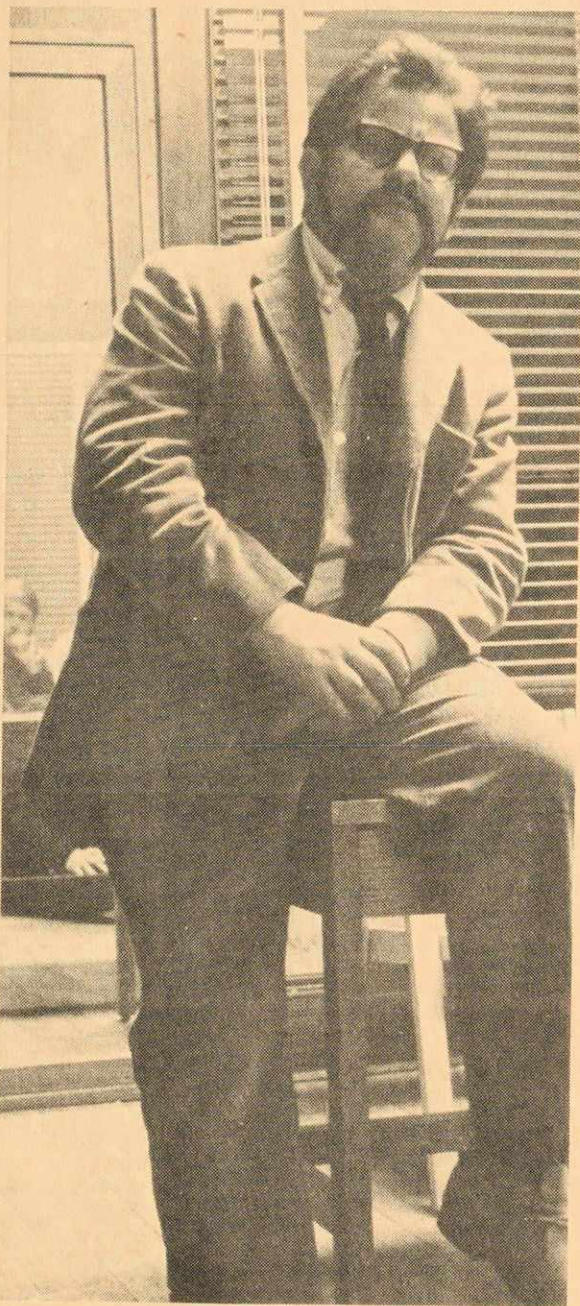
That seems to be his artistic creed. Very current it is too among novelists and film-makers, very popular.

For much of the film there was little immediate sense of the tension between hero and heroine. The woman's increasing vanity was carefully presented. The long close up of the fuss she makes over her hair, and the subsequent episode in the hair-dressers were well done and certainly pointed. Yet they lost a good deal of power simply

because the opposing scenes which show the man's loss of sexual independence were muffed by comparison. Indeed a generally disconcerting feature of the film, and one which is related to the absence of tension, is its unevenness of quality. The scenes in the rubbish dump and park were cinematic cliches. So were many of the chase scenes. The use of two mediums, black and white and colour, was boldly experimental on the other hand, and gave the film a most exciting texture. The transition from sterile looking countryside in black and white to a rich and startling green, luxuriantly grassy, caught the mood of a fresh flight into ecstasy. The woman's joyous murder of the dubiously respectable public relations man, and the following shots in slow motion which show the woman and her thrall enjoying a ritualistic fornication in primitive wilderness are frighteningly beautiful. Here was high tension. And it should be noted that throughout the film the sex act was presented with thoroughly unsalacious integrity.

Larry Kent frequently attempted to make his subject comical. We see the ex-student, for example, building a brick case with books and boards. We hear little epigrams about the pill, and about the similarity of a Ph.D student to a salesman. Sometimes these jokes seem forced. They were different in tone from the cinematic humour elsewhere employed: the use of montage and of ironically juxtaposed images for satiric purposes, sudden cuts from a scene of loveless sex to a photograph of a married couple, or the use of one-half of the frame to suggest responsible social action — the fire fighters for example — in contrast to the reeling lover, on the other half of the frame, incongruously present. Here was valid satiric comment, perhaps even a hint of problematic tension. I wish there had been more of it in the film.

Above all HIGH was interesting for the conception of cinematic art it so intensely realizes. Larry Kent does not provide a human norm or value in the film. There is nothing in the film itself for the pleasure-ethic to contend with. The audience must supply the values. Consequently a hippy who saw this film would scarcely think his irresponsible role in society was being attacked. Most middle class adults over thirty would walk out or not want to see the film again. The uncritical student would simply be entertained. The person who likes dramatic shape and a problematic mixing of light and shade would find it slack. When a director relies so heavily on the mental activity of his audience is he not committed to hopeless disparity and chaos?



# 'Preaching bores audiences'

Last week Dal scooped every other college campus in Canada. It sponsored the world premiere of Larry Kent's film "High".

Kent talks to the Gazette's Linda Gillingwater: Linda: You were a drama major at UBC in '63; what prompted you to become a film maker rather than a drama director?

Kent: I guess everybody wants to make a film at one time or another. I was in theatre and had written a couple of plays that had been produced. I had directed some of them myself but I was dissatisfied because the stage had become so restrictive. I just decided to make a film and it turned out to be Bitter Ash. I had to work out different techniques and I guess that would be one of the main failings of my third film "When Tomorrow Dies"; it was a good film but not a great one because I was still working on techniques. Not all of them worked.

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Linda: Film making is an expensive proposition; how did you finance your first film?

Kent: I worked in the summer as a printer and I just poured everything I had into it. I got a bit of credit and have been working on that ever since.

Linda: Beckett says he is more interested in the shape of ideas than in the actual ideas themselves. You too seem to place a strong emphasis upon technique; do you also have strong personal ideas you are trying to point out?

Kent: Well I suppose you can have a moral and still remain within the realm of art. But you can only show what you believe is happening today. The audience decides for itself, I don't like giving pat answers nor do I want to point out solutions; I just want to present a particular situation the way I see it. If you present a moral, nobody has to think. They get disgusted and bored with preaching. At all costs this should be avoided.

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Linda: Everyone has to have ideas, thoughts and these are bound to influence your work aren't they?

Kent: Of course you have to have ideas but you always have to remember they are just your ideas and they can be rejected by the audience.

Linda: It appears that more than the audience is rejecting your ideas at the moment; I understand the Montreal Film Festival banned your film. Surprisingly enough no one appeared to be offended by it at last night's showing and Halifax isn't particularly noted for its progressive audiences.

Kent: Sure. The reason "High" was banned is audiences have changed but censors haven't. Censorship is an impossible thing. At all times censors are ten years behind the audiences. A liberal board is perhaps two years behind.

Linda: Am I correct in assuming that you oppose all censorship no matter how liberal it might be?

Kent: Yes. Censorship should be done by the people. It's all a matter of selectivity . . . people go to see films they want to see. They should be allowed to see what they want.

Linda: Irrespective of the age group?

Kent: It's a lot of nonsense about age. Children become aware of everything about the age of two or three. They should see nudity from the time they are born so they don't grow up with any of the hang-ups and the bull shit that most of grew up with. This eliminates the tremendous desire to see the nude male body or the nude female body. There is a tremendous fear and dread that women have of the male body if they haven't seen it. But violence is a lot more dangerous on the screen than sex.

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Linda: Are there any subjects that film makers should consider taboo?

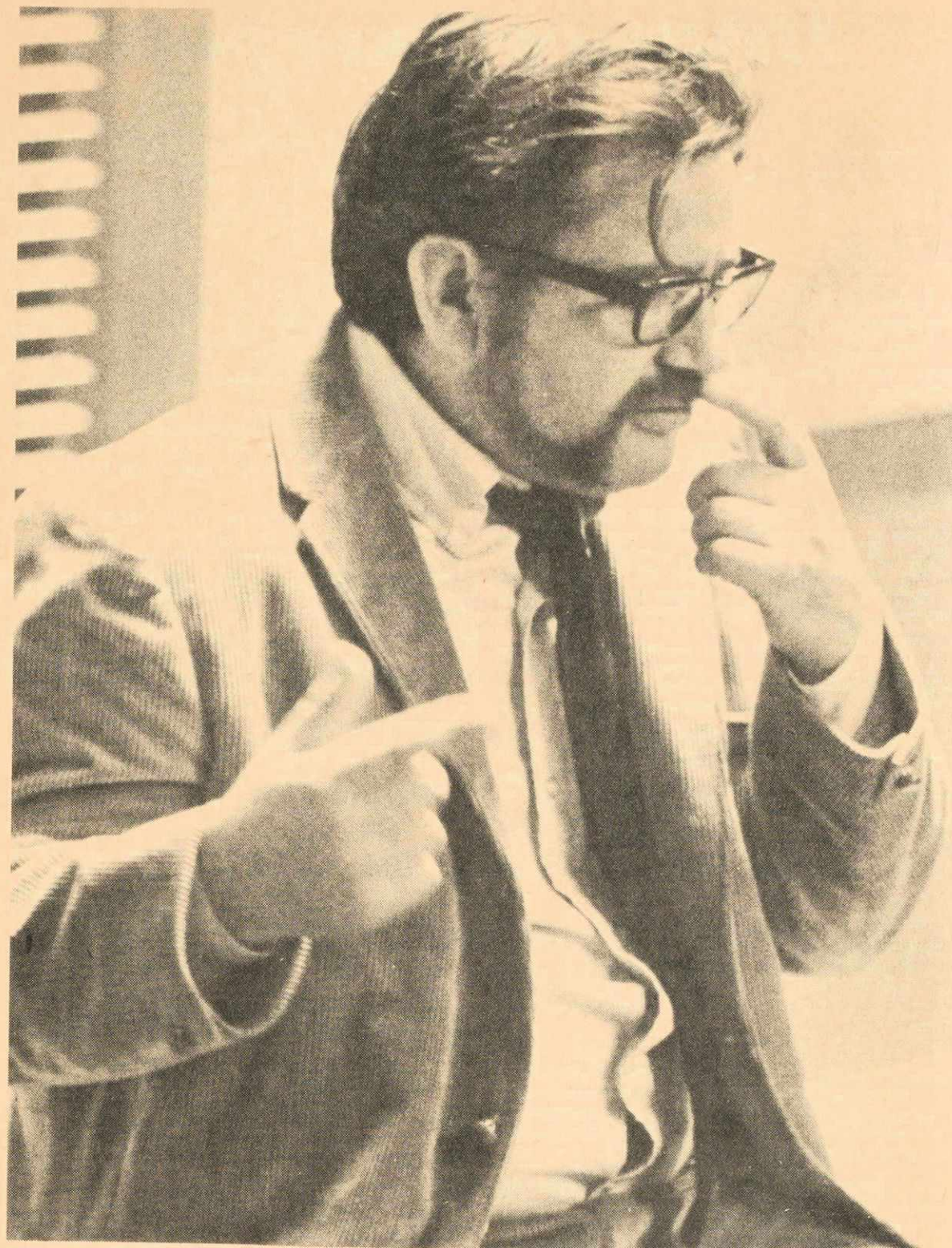
Kent: I think nothing is taboo. If everything were allowed it wouldn't be long before people became bored and pretty fed up with the stupid and the salacious. If everything were allowed, bad stags would be eliminated, I want to explore the sexual condition but only within a wider context of the entire human being. Right now you get bad stags catering to prurient interest. I want sex among other things and you can't discuss the human condition without it.

Linda: Has there been a change in attitudes among the population or is the ruckus about the so-called new morality largely another mythical?

Kent: There hasn't been a change. A change is happening but not with this generation. They have most of the hang-ups their parents had. They try harder but they are still stuck with ideas. This generation is better off than the last but there is still a long way to go.

Linda: High seems to deal with a segment of society which has been able to throw off the hang-ups you claim we are subject to.

Kent: Yes but the characters in the film don't know how to use their freedom. They are spoiled kids and society's hold on them has been completely lost. Their selfishness has run wild and they feel they can do what they want -- even take life.



(Photos by BERNARD TURPIN)

Linda: Does there appear to be a general trend towards anarchy?

Kent: I think so. There are more thrill types of killing than before. We are definitely a hedonistic society. More people are pursuing pleasure for its own sake and, like anything else pursued for its own sake, you have to go further and further.

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Linda: Is this a cop-out by young people, or do they sincerely feel change is impossible?

Kent: Well, whenever people come to a big administration it seems to be an almost impossible task to meet it. This was especially pointed out during the civil rights movement when a lot of white workers sort of walked around. The non-violent things just don't work. It seems the only way to change things is the violent way.

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Linda: Is it true, as Julian Bond said, that flower power can never become a reality. Fascist power is the sole truth.

Kent: Flower power is almost non-existent. Guys see flower power girls and they are raping them like crazy. The girls are so stoned they don't know what's happening or if they do know they don't know how to go about reporting it. This murder that has just happened in the States proves it. Two negro boys killed a suburban couple. It was also proven they had raped hippie chicks en masse.

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Linda: How do you personally feel about the use of drugs?

Kent: I'm not sure. I've heard reports of genetic decomposition and deformation of babies. Certainly, anyone who wants children should watch it. I'm not sure about the effects of pot either. I'm not advocating it because I simply don't know. There are advocates who become positively evangelistic about it. This seems to me to be irresponsible because I don't know.

Linda: This raises a larger question of responsibility. What responsibility does a film maker have to the society in which he is operating?

Kent: A film maker should feel obliged to present things as he sees them — honestly. This is being responsible. I act as a mirror and this allows the society to see itself in a true light. If I don't glamorize it like Hollywood, nor make it purposefully ugly, but act as a true and honest mirror as far as I am able, then I am responsible.

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Linda: The National Film Board can absorb very few of the aspiring film makers. What can people who are interested in film making do?

Kent: At the moment there are few opportunities for Canadians; we can't even see each other's films. There should be seminars set up so new film makers can figure out how to start a film. I guess a newcomer should try to pay his people because people show up if they are being paid. Otherwise nobody turns up. For a young film maker it's got to be his enthusiasm that carries everybody through.

If it drops, everything does. I guess people should remember that the demands for acting in a film are vastly different than acting on stage. Voice training is good but is exactly opposite to what is needed on film. You don't need large gestures to get over footlights. You have to be able to project your thoughts; it's a case of being more than acting. A thousand thoughts have to be going through your mind; motivation should be cloudy and muddy because our motivation is cloudy and muddy.

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Linda: You are in debt because of your last three pictures; wouldn't the prospect of debt tend to intimidate some people who wanted to go into film making?

Kent: It can't. I don't worry about distribution. I make films because it's what I want to do and have to do. Morale is low at the Film Board; you don't need this fantastic drive simply because it's so easy to acquire anything you want. The most we who have had some experience can do is to show how to shoot, how to cut, but the rest depends upon desire and drive.

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