

Douglas Coupland's literary Lego

BY MATEO YORKE

Ever since I found out that "Generation X" was more than a catchy label thrown upon us by the media moguls of CNN and MuchMusic, I have been a Douglas Coupland fan.

When I found out that he would be included in this year's Atlantic Film Festival, I was obviously excited and curious at the same time. A movie by and starring Douglas Coupland? Major sell-out or a new multimedia outlet for his pontifications?

It turned out that Coupland's film was designed more towards booktour material than a serious film festival production. It also turned out to be an entertaining evening with Canada's foremost contemporary author.

Held at the new Wormwood's on Gottingen St., Coupland took the floor looking much more like a Clayoquot Crusader than his clean-cut backcover photo. The first part of the evening was an unscripted reading of three pieces of new material Coupland has been working on since the release of *Microserfs*, this summer's Microsoft-angst inspired bestseller.

Coupland's first reading cut straight to the heart of one of today's major issues: euthanasia. He told the true story of a young woman who spent nearly ten years in a coma, without life support, before passing on. Coupland's deep, slow voice transformed the excited audience into pensive sympathizers. He promised a more "upbeat" second piece.

In that reading, Coupland confessed that in his teens, he was a "Harold", named for the death-obsessed character in "Harold and Maude". He told us of hanging out, as many teenage Harolds do, in a graveyard in the hills above his Vancouver home. In his intriguing style, Coupland gave us a cross-cultural view of death and the ecological damage done by the expansion of his graveyard into the neighbouring B.C. rainforest.

FILM FESTIVAL

Douglas Coupland
Close Personal Friend

Directed by Jennifer Cowan

Coupland's last reading was called "1975 — This is 1995." It is the story of someone from 1975 winning a three week trip to the wonderful world of 1995 in a kind of Star Trek-like game show. In this piece, Coupland's familiar style really shone. He led us through our many technological advances, from a totally new, or rather, 20-year-old, perspective.

The crux of this reading was that we exist in a new world with two extremes that are no longer defined by Capitalism versus Communism, or other Cold War politics. The new order has Bill Gates at one end of the ideological spectrum and the Unabomber at the other. Whether you dig Windows 95 code or a Luddite's pencil scratchings, Coupland's topical style is sure to convert your way of thinking.

Coupland then turned the show over to the projectionist. First up were six ads made for foreign audiences of MuchMusic, each with a different cinematographical style and a different Coupland voice-over from his earlier work, *Life After God*. At about 15 or so seconds apiece, this was high-energy film.

The main feature was the 25 minutes of *Douglas Coupland: Close Personal Friend*. This experimental style documentary is pure Coupland. Looking like some cyber-cross of an R.E.M. video, a Calvin Klein advertisement, and a return trip through all those Saturday morning ads you watched in 1979, Director/Producer Jennifer Cowan interviewed Coupland on one of his favourite subjects: "How do you get a life in the 20th century?"

The result was a visually pleasing and thought-provoking voyage through the body, mind, and soul. It's filled with Coupland's multi-directional - yet somehow unified - ponderings about our culture and the way it



is controlled by our individual memories and the massive amounts of information that is stored globally. Cowan shows some real talent for the use of multimedia on film. She and Coupland spent three days in the production of the film visiting art galleries and watching Coco Puffs commercials. The film would cut to appropriate news footage, commercials, or flying text chunks as Coupland shared his Toffler-like ideas.

After the film, the co-presenters from Frog Hollow handled the complete commercial works of Coupland on sale (he's published a number of other pieces in magazines and literary journals) while Coupland autographed the copies bought and brought by the audience. Coupland graciously agreed to sign my complete four-pack and to answer a few questions for the Gazette afterward.

After dealing with dozens of autographs and a number of pressing issues with his publisher, a nearly exhausted Coupland sat down with me in the Fife and Drum Pub for a drink and nearly an hour of conversation. Coupland's easy-going style was almost a shyness, a reserved person whose attention was easily distracted by explod-

ing Football logos on the overhead television.

Gaz: So what point on the *Microserfs* world tour are you? What's next?

DC: There are about 10 weeks or so left. I'm leaving for Vancouver tomorrow for a couple of days break from the tour. I don't like the idea of seeing home for only one of two nights in the next ten weeks...Then I'm going down to the California desert for about a month for the isolation...

Gaz: So the desert escape to Palm Springs in *Generation X* is part of your life too?

DC: Palm Springs isn't isolated enough. I need to be out in the Mohave — real isolation. Then it's off to Europe for more readings...I've been published in 23 languages, and in Scandinavia, for example, they work so hard, packing books into their trunk at 6:00 a.m.

Gaz: So how would you describe your career since you've hit with some success?

DC: Since '91 it's been endless plateaus of naivete...but the people at Harper-Collins have been really good...

Gaz: When can we expect something new?

DC: There's something coming out around Christmas time. No publicity, just released. I plan to take 1996 off.

Gaz: First you were called the voice of the twenty-something generation; why now in *Microserfs* is it computer geeks?

DC: The friends I went to college with all work at Microsoft or IBM or wherever.

Gaz: The *Microserfs* characters create a computer Lego called OOP. What about Lego? Were you an addict as a kid?

DC: Everybody had some form of building toys, tinker toys, mechano, or Lego. Mine was Lego, like a lot of people. I used to say that Duplo was for kids who couldn't hack Lego.

The conversation drifted from Troy MacLure and the Simpsons (his brother tapes episodes for him when he's touring) to the potential demise of Canadian football to the multi-national corporation cashpits like Disney's NHL Mighty Ducks in a city with neither hockey culture nor history.

Coupland left me with a warning. "You won't even know it, but Disney could own that drink in front of you. You may wake up tomorrow to find that Disney owns your hair and there would be nothing you could do."

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