

Me, machines and my trip to the Khyber Art Gallery

BY FREDRICK VOKEY

It was the stern-faced insignia of the Autobots that brought this toy store, nostalgiaophilia to Peter Flemming's latest art exhibit now showing at the Khyber Art Gallery, *Why Do Machines Think They're Human?*

Anticipation, not unabated by my editor who brought me this story with more enthusiasm than meets the eye (despite popular opinion, bad puns *are* sexy), overrode my otherwise Homer Simpson take on climbing three flights of stairs.

It was almost well worth it.

What I should have encountered was a television displaying my image via VCR-video camera hook-up that, courtesy of a system of plastic, metal, and electric doodads — not unlike the Robotix toys against which you and your grade-two buddies judged the coolness of all possible Christmas gifts — taped me and played me back along with the tapings of all the past viewers, and

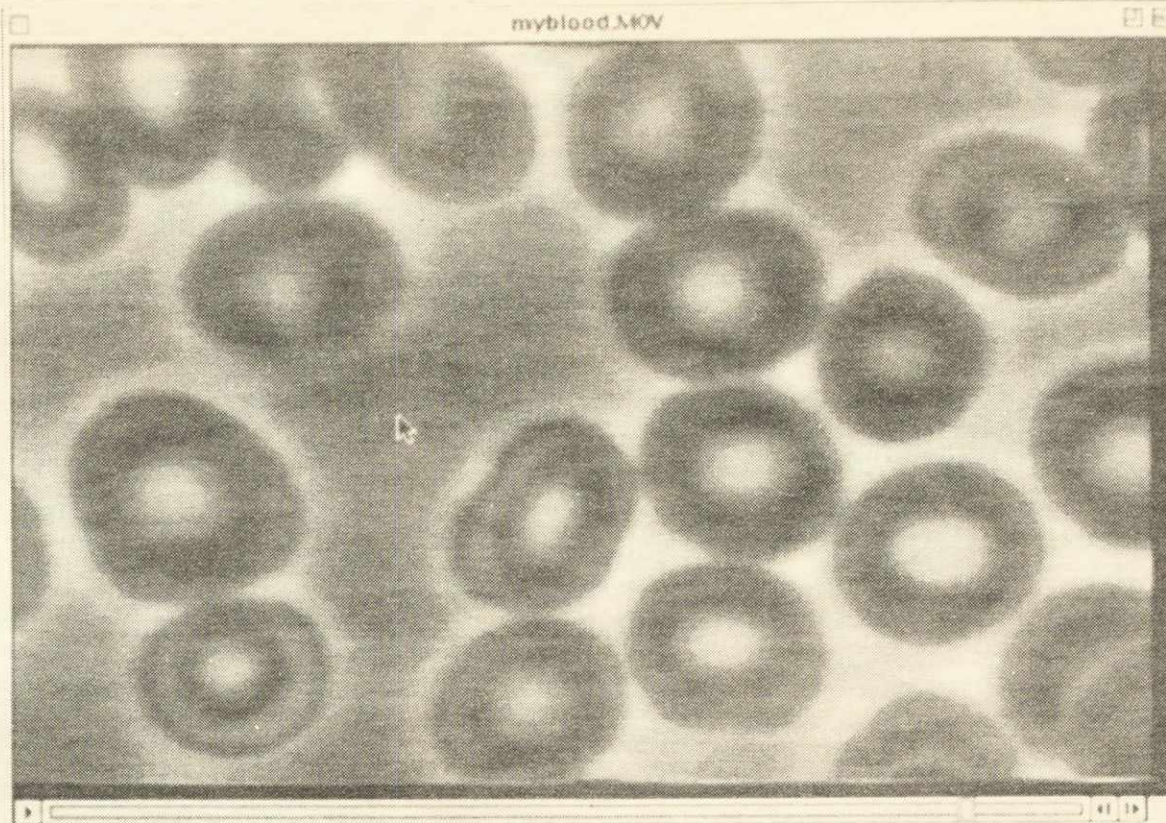
all to the tune of the audio track of a "How to Program Your VCR" instructional tape. Pretty cool, hey.

Well, I say, "should have encountered" because it was broke, which — given the title — is kinda funny (not haha funny, but 'hey, you just slipped on the ice' funny).

Well, "to err is human," as the story goes. So I guess if we demand Flemming get everything right down to the tiniest detail we'd be demanding he be a machine, at least a machine that is not too stupid to program a VCR.

But aren't we all machines? I say to the mirror amidst deciding which beret best matches my black turtleneck. Indeed some philosophers insist we are simply wet machines. So I guess some machines could be considered dry humans, hahahahaha!

Whether or not we are on the same continuum as computers, Corvettes and condom dispensers, the juxtaposition of the mechanical and the human has embodied itself in



Machinate: a new installation at the Khyber Arts Centre.

such cultural icons as the beloved Robocop, that prick Data from Star Trek and the reason you know Steve Guttenburg's name, Short Circuit's Johnny 5.

While a little more highbrow than my examples, Liawan, an artist not unfamiliar with the Halifax scene, has decorated the main gallery of the Khyber with *Machinate*, his "anthropomorphic and ethnographical study of machines as a species." Whether it is a slide show

composed of dead plant life, the tripod-mounted Chinese radio gadget that hums a quiet Buddhist chant or the televisions playing videos of the gooey workings our intestines, esophagi, rectum or anywhere else a doctor can cram a camera, one walking into Liawan's display gets the creepy feeling of intruding on these half-human, half-mechanical creatures who are just hanging out quietly doing their thing.

In fact, they're doing it right

now. While you're reading this the Buddhist chant is still humming, the slide show still flicking, Flemming's VCR still thinking it's human. If I were you I'd take a moment out of your day to go see them while the good folks at the Khyber have them in a controlled environment. Before long they'll be out roaming the streets, going for coffee and reading terribly terrific articles in the school paper.

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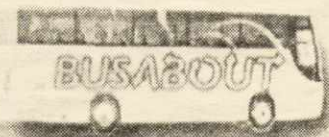
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