

ARTS

Mettler joins film elite with *Top of His Head*

by Jason Brent

It is often interesting to go back and look at the early work of very accomplished artists. I find it fascinating to look for the seeds of greatness in a rough first album, play, or film. Sometimes, however, an

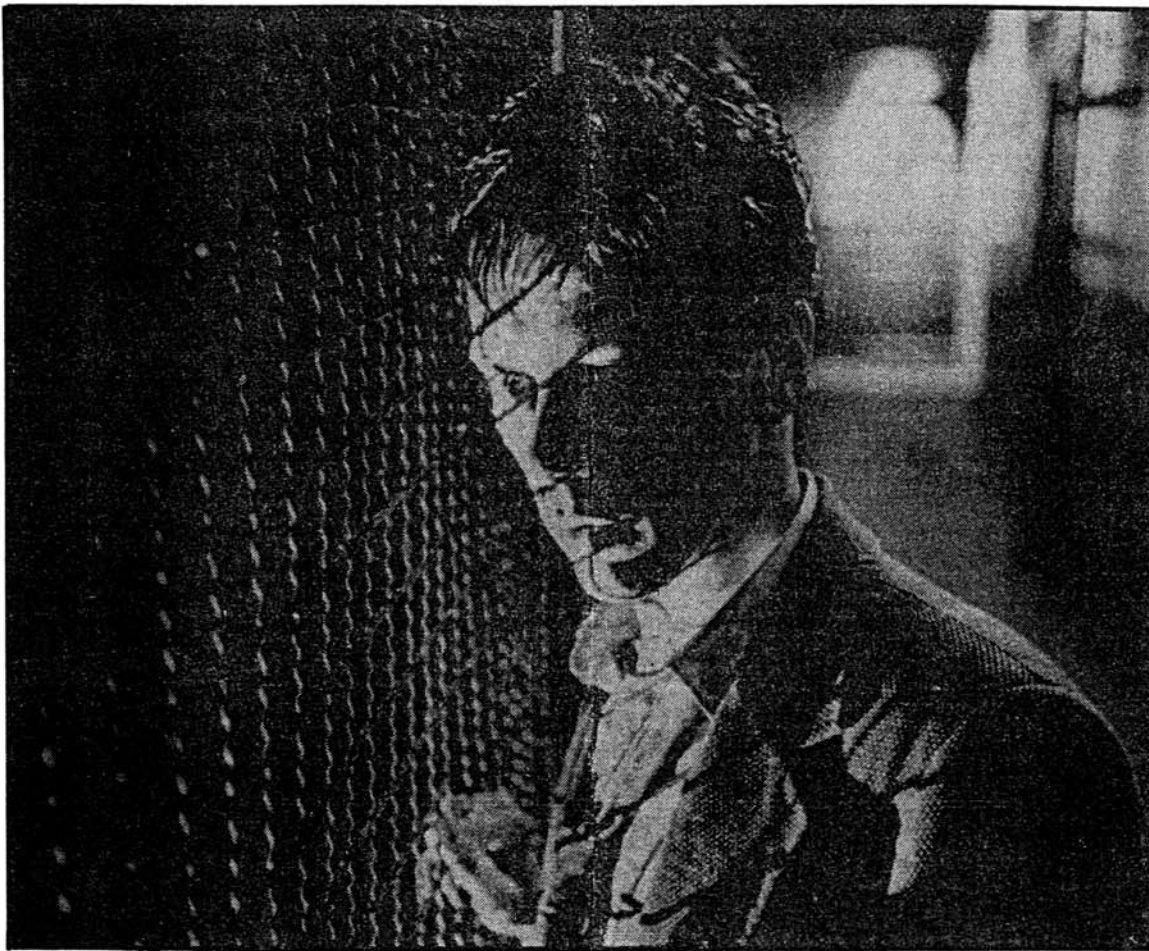
Top of His Head
opens November 24
Cineplex Odeon

artist is able to avoid many of the standard growing pains of their field and produce relatively mature work from the very beginning of his or her career. It certainly seems as if Peter Mettler is one of those people.

The Top of His Head is the first feature film from Mettler, who graduated from Ryerson in 1982 and has since worked as a cinematographer for Atom Egoyan (*Family Viewing*). If this film is a suggestion of things to come from this talented Torontonian, he will soon join Denys Arcand, David Cronenberg, and his friend Egoyan at the forefront of this nation's burgeoning film scene.

Set in Toronto, *The Top of His Head* is an eccentric and extremely well conceived look at the life of Gus Victor (much lauded stage actor Stephen Ouimette), an ace satellite dish salesman. The film examines the not-so-gradual dissolution of the framework of Victor's life, a dissolution whose catalyst is Lucy (Christie MacFadyen), a performance artist cum animal rights activist with whom Gus falls in love.

There are several different levels upon which this film may be considered, depending on how much energy and thought the viewer is willing to commit to its viewing. On the simple narrative level, this is a peculiar and somewhat meandering thriller in which Gus is pursued by a trio of oddball undercover cops who



Stephen Ouimette excels as a satellite dish salesman in *Top of His Head*

assume that Lucy's interest in Gus is more than just romantic, that she is in fact after his expertise in satellite communications to help her stage the next in a series of disruptive performance pieces aimed at increasing the public's awareness of the dire situation in which our planet presently finds itself. As Gus tries to contact Lucy, he finds only a cryptic note which the police interpret as some sort of subversive communication,

which only serves to fuel their interest in the increasingly frazzled Gus.

On this simple level, the film is relatively engaging, but to stop your examination there would not only shortchange writer/director Mettler but cause you to miss the opportunity to be intellectually challenged by this wonderfully thoughtful film. Granted, you would still see, if not fully understand and appreciate, a remarkably subtle leading performance

from Ouimette. There would still be Gary Reineke's solid supporting work as the head of Gus's undercover pursuers, and you would no doubt be wowed by MacFadyen's lyrical moments as Lucy.

You would, nonetheless, be removing the key element from this work if you did not consider the motions, images, and settings which wondrously fill the screen. Occasionally the more mature and self-

assured cinematographer in Mettler dominates the burgeoning writer-director, as fascination with images interferes with the development of ideas. However, even this flaw, in its way, becomes part of the whole examination of Gus's world. You can sense Gus's discontent on a merely narrative level, but for its source, it is necessary to look deeper, where the images themselves become the ideas. Gus is a man who has tired of numbers and satellite dishes, networks and sales. What Lucy provides is the opportunity to leave the technical framework behind.

The film, on this level, becomes an examination of the inability of the technology of Gus's world to interpret, and harmonize with, Lucy's mournfully beautiful natural world. This film does not use words to preach about the dehumanizing effect of invasive technology or the tragic damage caused to our wondrously and complexly beautiful planet by a self-absorbed human race. Mettler avoids all the trite phrases and platitudes which so often fill attempts to deal with this issue and prevent the exploration or exposition of the very nature of the problem. He stands aside as writer, and allows us to observe the battle between Gus's facts and figures and Lucy's world, where every element of nature is, in and of itself, significant, despite its resistance to interpretation or trivialization.

From a purely technical point of view, *The Top of His Head*, with its whirling images, is a visually powerful film, but upon closer examination, this film says far more visually than it would perhaps be possible to say verbally without sinking into a numbing diatribe. One can only hope that Mettler will receive enough financial and spiritual support from his peers to allow him to wow us again and again.