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# PAULVISION

MEETS **GEN**

**X**

"Paul has 'Paulvision'," Douglas Coupland says over the phone from his Vancouver home. He's talking about Paul Fox, who directed *Everything's Gone Green (EGG)* from Coupland's original screenplay. Specifically, he's referring to Fox's ability to successfully translate Coupland's voice from text to screen.

*Everything's Gone Green*  
Paul Fox  
(Canada, 2006)

Photo: Lincoln Clarkes







GEN



**Coupland is credited with having given voice to the alienated youth of just about every generation since the baby boom**



*Everything's Gone Green*  
Paul Fox  
(Canada, 2006)

by Shaun Smith

As anyone can tell you who has read his books, heard him speak, or seen his art, Douglas Coupland communicates in objects. His mind latches onto things, polishing them into concise observations—essential, beautiful, ironic and humorous—then returns them to you like, and sometimes even as, sculptures. He is interested in the elasticity of thing—language, stories, Styrofoam, books, buildings, toilets, numbers, detergent bottles, pictures—because he wants to position humanity at the centre of that elasticity. Everything he creates is about people. That's why one can't help but smile when he invents that word, "Paulvision." It may seem meaningless (though with Coupland's influence it could well become meaningful) but at its heart, it is an act of invention that communicates something very specific and human. In that, it is a quintessentially Couplandesque act of tenderness.

Best known as the author of the 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, Douglas Coupland is widely credited with having given voice to the alienated youth of just about every generation since the end of the baby boom. He has published 10 other novels along similar themes, including this year's *jPod*, and is perhaps the only Canadian novelist over 40 who consistently maintains a devoted audience under 30. He has also published six nonfiction books, including *Souvenir of Canada*, which surveys iconic ephemera from Canadian pop

culture, including the stubby beer bottle, poutine and the name Doug; it was made into a feature documentary, starring Coupland, by Robin Neinstein in 2005.

In addition, Coupland is an acclaimed playwright and performer, having recently starred in his own one-man play, entitled *September 10, 2001*, at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-on-Avon, Ont. That's not all: he is also a sculptor and visual artist whose work has seen numerous international shows. Recognized as one of the world's leading pop-culture artists, observers and commentators, Coupland's identity has actually transcended itself to become part of the culture he observes. The word "Couplandesque" is in the vernacular, and Coupland himself, who professes to have no idea what that word means, winkingly acknowledges his situation by making light of it in his own fiction. To wit, the opening line from *jPod*: "Oh, God. I feel like a refugee from a Douglas Coupland novel."

This is a weighty provenance for any writer to bring to a film project, especially in Canada. Where a writer's vision might normally take a back seat to that of a director, according to EGG's producer, Chris Nanos, that was never going to be the case here. "We had to meet the expectations and perceptions of a Douglas Coupland-penned film," says Nanos.

Originally written eight years ago for another producer but never made, the script lay dormant in Coupland's house until Nanos contacted him in 2002 asking if he had any screenplays. Heading up the newly created Features & Special Projects division at Radke Films in Toronto, Nanos had been contacting artists across disciplines looking for scripts. "Our thinking was to look under rocks where other production companies may not have," says Nanos. What he found under Coupland's rock was a classic Gen X-style story about pop culture, disaffected youth and ironic happenstance. Nanos recognized, along with the film's executive producer, Radke partner Scott Mackenzie, that they had the opportunity to put something on screen that no one had ever put there before. That's because although many of Coupland's novels had been optioned numerous times (rumours abound about a production of *Gen X*, but Coupland says he'll believe it when he sees it), none had ever made it to the screen. So 15 years later, Radke and their West Coast production partners on the film, True West Films, were able to beat everyone else to the punch. EGG was to become Coupland's first feature.

*Everything's Gone Green* tells the story of Vancouverite slacker Ryan (Paulo Costanzo), who is facing his 30th birthday with few prospects. Dumped by his girlfriend because he is "not motivated to awaken the warrior within," and fired from his office job for stashing mock-suicidal poetry on the company's server, Ryan finds himself facing "loser" status. Then, through a perverse twist of fate, he stumbles into a job as a writer and photographer at the BC Lottery Bureau, where he is tasked by his boss, Alan (Aidan Devine), with creating profiles of lottery winners for the Bureau's free magazine, *Winners*. Ryan is a dreamer, and one day, while visiting a whale that has beached itself and died on the city's Sunset Beach, he encounters a beautiful young Chinese woman, named Ming (Steph Song). The two make a connection, but Ming's boyfriend, Bryce (J.R. Bourne), is in league with the Japanese yakuza and he tempts Ryan into a money-laundering scheme. One thing leads to another and Ryan eventually has to choose between winning Ming's love with honesty or losing his heart by going crooked with Bryce.

Hiring a director who understood the "Couplandesque" aesthetic that informed this script was vital for the project. Since the publication of *Gen X*, Coupland has been carving out an ironic, pop-culture landscape, and it was essential to re-create onscreen what people saw in their heads when they read one of his novels. Coupland trusted Nanos implicitly to find the right person. "If you work with someone you have to trust them," he says. "If you don't trust them, why are you working with them? If Chris said, 'We got Charles Manson out of prison and we'd like him to direct it,' I'd go, 'Okay, well, if you think that's a good idea, sure!'"

Nanos and Mackenzie talked to directors from Canada, the U.S. and the U.K., but eventually zeroed in on Fox because even though he had never made a feature film (he was about to start production on his first, *The Dark Hours*), they felt he understood the material best. "What Paul Fox relayed back to us and understood more than anyone else," says Nanos, "was that this project was going to be about showing 'the world of Douglas Coupland'."

Over the past 16 years, Paul Fox has racked up an impressive list of credits and kudos. He graduated from New York's School of Visual Arts in 1990, and his thesis film, *Last Round Up*, a noir portrait of a failed boxer, won Best Fiction Film at the Mexico

# GEN X

*Everything's Gone Green*  
Paul Fox  
(Canada, 2006)



City Film Festival. *Last Round Up* was also invited to Sundance and secured Fox a "first look" deal at New Line Cinema in New York. In 1996 he attended the CFC's (Canadian Film Centre's) Director's Lab, and in 2002 his short film

*Reunion*, adapted from the Guy Vanderhaeghe short story, played in festivals around the world. His first feature, *The Dark Hours*, a psychological thriller about a troubled psychiatrist who is stalked by a patient, was made with the CFC's support through the Feature Film Project in 2004. That film received critical acclaim and won numerous festival awards, including Best Film at the New York Horror Film Festival and the Audience Award at Edinburgh's Dead By Dawn Festival. In addition, Fox has directed numerous music videos, commercials and episodes of television series such as *Cold Squad*, *The Associates* and *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.

Ironically, one credit Fox, who at 43 is just one year younger than Coupland, could not have listed on his CV early on was Douglas Coupland scholar. "I was aware of the *Gen X* stuff and Coupland, but it sort of passed me by. I came to it later," he admits. "I was a reader, but I was much more immersed in movies."

For Fox, making *EGG*, which was shot over 19 days in June 2005 for \$2 million, was a highly intuitive process. It may have been this initial distance that gave him the objectivity to properly envisage the film's aesthetic. "I knew what the movie should feel and look like," says Fox, who went back and re-read "most" of Coupland's books after landing the job. "We sort of know what Hemingwayesque is, or Kafkaesque. I think there are people, without having read any Coupland, who could tell you what Couplandesque is."

Another irony about Fox's involvement was that he is not from Vancouver. It functions very much like a character in the film, and it was important to all parties that *EGG* show the "real" city. To get things right, Fox turned to TV and film veteran David Frazee. "He's shot pretty much every episode of *Da Vinci's Inquest* over the last seven years," says Fox, "so he knows that city like the back of his hand." Frazee was both DOP and camera operator on the shoot. "He and I got into sync very quickly," says Fox. "We were very aware of how to articulate Doug Coupland's vision. All the visual decisions came out of that. We put a lot of effort into locations, just driving around in a van." Not being from Vancouver himself, Fox knew that he could also augment Frazee's knowledge of the city with an outsider's perspective. "I think it was quite advantageous that I am not a Vancouverite," he states. "In your own city there are things you stop noticing after a while. And then I come in and say, 'Hey, there are mountains up there.' There's that sense of seeing it all with fresh eyes."



Fraze also worked closely with Fox to establish a distinctive architecture for the film frame. "We were pretty rigorous in terms of composition," says Fox. "One of the things I'd wanted to do but wasn't able to pull off financially was to shoot in Scope, in widescreen, because that allows you to create compositions using a lot of empty space, and I think empty space is a powerful tool." Fox cites a shot that places Ryan in the frame's lower half when he is being fired, and another that finds a palm tree drifting in at an angle. "We'd set up a shot and then say, 'Now what can we do to tweak it just a bit?' and we'd shift it around until it was just off the expected place so that the characters were fighting the negative space." The achieved look—one that echoes Ryan's situation—is simultaneously one of imbalance and liberation, as though certain characters and objects had been cut loose from their moorings and drifted to the bottom, side or corner of the frame.

Another key crew member was production designer Peter Andringa, whose previous credits include Dana Lustig's *Confessions of a Sociopathic Social Climber* and Robert Vince's *Spymate*. It was Andringa who was responsible for dressing the set to reflect Coupland's pop sensibilities. "Peter went out to Doug's house because Doug was going to lend him some stuff," says Fox, "but then Peter got nervous. Film sets are full of grips carrying equipment around and he didn't want to be responsible for damaging any of Doug's artwork." Instead, Andringa, who joined Fox and Frazee as the core team that achieved the film's look, re-created much of the artwork in Coupland's house. "In the very first shot, there's a sculpture made of fishing buoys that is absolutely a Doug Coupland piece re-created by the art department." Other items

replicated include a wall of Kraft Dinner boxes, a stack of plastic patio chairs wrapped in cellophane, an installation of detergent bottles, and a boulder-sized tomato. "All of that stuff is absolutely Doug," says Fox. "On the set for Ryan's apartment I remember Doug arriving and saying, 'It's too freaky; it's just like stepping into my brain.'"

As for working with Coupland, Fox indicates that it couldn't have been easier. There was a lot of back-and-forth in the early stages, getting the script ready, and more again during editing, but Coupland never interfered with the shoot. "He actually remained very hands-off," says Fox. "He would mostly just show up as this kind of benevolent uncle. We'd be shooting, and he'd come in and smile and say 'Just the way I pictured it.'"

Given Coupland's larger-than-life persona, Fox might have reasonably felt overshadowed, even on his own set, but that was not the case. "My ideal career has always been more of a Howard Hawks or Ang Lee kind of a career," he comments confidently. "Hawks can do *Scarface*, then *His Girl Friday* and then *Red River*, or Lee can do *Sense and Sensibility*, *Brokeback Mountain* and *Hulk*, and yet I'm sure there are thematic things that define them. The things I tend to foreground might be different from someone else's foreground." In the end, it was in the simplest scenes that he felt most present. "That to me feels like a very 'Paul Fox' scene," he says, referring to a moment when Ryan and Ming meet by chance in a grocery store. "Sitting on that one wide frame and letting the actors be uncomfortable in that frame. You're not cutting it up with close-ups or letting them off the hook. It's simple and very character-driven and real."

Aidan Devine had previously worked with Fox, on both *The Dark Hours* and *Reunion*. He keeps returning because of this respect for realism. "[Fox] seems to trust me to come up with a performance and a character," says Devine. "That really instills a confidence in an actor and generally makes for

a better, more creative performance. It takes a lot of courage for a director to work this way."

"He's a gentle director," says Steph Song, who has just finished work on the new Jet Li vehicle, *Rogue*. "Paul gives minimal direction and trusts the actors, but, more importantly, trusts the script to speak for itself."

"He simply knew how to let me take the reins and go," agrees Paulo Costanzo, best known as Matt LeBlanc's brother Michael from the TV series *Joey*. "His directions were seldom, but when they came they were poignant and impressively perceptive. He was just this quiet, super intelligent movie-Yoda who made me feel very much that I should trust myself." As for Coupland's script, Costanzo says, "You didn't have to do any work. It read

itself. It just took you along for the ride."

Now at the other end of the ride, Coupland is tremendously pleased with the film. "I'm happy that it's really watchable," he says. At heart Coupland is an inventor, not in the traditional sense, with cogs and pulleys, but in the artistic sense. Like all great artists, he looks around and when he doesn't see the world he wants he invents it, and because of the sheer scope of his invention it seems strange that the hyper-inventive film industry was so slow to embrace him. Thankfully that oversight has now been redressed.

And what of "Paulviston"? What is the meaning of that quintessentially Couplandesque invention? Perhaps Chris Nanos answers best. "It was Paul Fox who gave the instruction for the visual tone of the film by summing it up as 'a skewed reality,'" he says. "When he said those words, I knew he was directing from within the script. He really went into the material and intelligently realized it. The reason *Everything's Gone Green* is a Douglas Coupland film is only because it's a Paul Fox film."

Shaun Smith is a freelance writer in Toronto who specializes in film, fiction and food.

**The film's look is one of both imbalance and liberation, as though characters had been cut loose and drifted to the edge of the frame**