Claude Jutra’s

Surfacing

As I sat down to write this review, I noticed in the paper that producer Beryl Fox had written a letter in response to her Base’s devastating review of the film in the Toronto Star. Base’s critique of Surfacing was, in fact, reckless and abusive—abusive in its generalized derision of the film’s “female fright—ness” and reckless as a film review. If we are striving to develop some sort of serious national cinema, we must not go hand in hand with those (as I use Base’s word, “committed”) criticism and discussion.

First, it is not, as Base headlined, “Women’s Intrusive Surfacing” that may be “tinging with all hands” (as the argument goes). It is Claude Jutra’s film. Films are not novels and should not be expected to tell a totally different story. As Jutra said in an interview, “There’s no doubt that it would have been something different from the book. It tells a story we had to take.” Beryl Fox suggests in her piece that “male chauvinists” like Base will never be “willing to understand a movie with a strong female lead,” and ends by suggesting women (and sensitive, aware men) should decide the film’s worth.

What, then, is Surfacing about? What does the film communicate about women, and what is the struggle it is trying to define? It will disappoint audiences expecting a “comedy of the sex” or a “crisis of involvement.” It is Claude Jutra’s film printed in the extreme by the character of a woman the film erupts from these relationships.

In opposition to Anna, Kate represents the extreme of the potentially liberated woman: earthy-pretty (needing no artificial beauty), in control of her body, and able to cope with the complexities of her character—she ends up sexless and bewildered through much of the film. Bottoms matches her inability to cope with the complexities of her character—she ends up sexless and bewildered through much of the film. Bottoms matches her inability to cope with the complexities of her character. The film doesn’t survive the contradictions it sets up when Kate is finally free of guilt and burden of the “father,” she soopos herself in the lake, while And Mortifee’s “Gypsy Girl” on the soundtrack makes one cringe. Along with the painful voiceover and trite use of “freedom-hero” imagery, she then rejoins Joe after her speech about independence. The ending gives one the feeling that the heroine’s re-surfacing is a rushed event in desperate need of further, more careful development.

Surfacing does attempt to raise some crucial issues about women within contemporary culture. Richard Leiterman’s camera almost compensates visually for Kathleen Beller’s inability by capturing the turbulence of the lake, and the intense beauty of the wilderness through sensual images that beg to be touched. If Surfacing is not wholly successful, it is nonetheless refreshing to see a film which has the integrity to approach these issues within a Canadian context.

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