The disturbing dialectic of Anne-Claire Poirier

by Francine Prévost

Anne-Claire Poirier's films are disturbing - and La Quarantaine is no exception. Always different, her films have never been what the public expected. At a time when the National Film Board was the midst of cinéma direct, Anne-Claire Poirier made a fiction film, La fin des étés (1964), styling herself after her favorite filmmakers - Agnès Varda, François Truffaut and Alain Resnais - for whom cinema also meant fiction. A few years later, when her peers were engrossed in social or political problems, Anne-Claire spoke for subjectivity, the feminine "I" in her first feature, De mère en fille (1968). And in the early 70's, while the team of the "En tant que femme" series were articulating women, Anne-Claire made Les Filles du Roy (1973), a long poem dedicated to the rehabilitation of "our faded heroines, women stripped of all dimension in our history books." Anne-Claire Poirier's cinematic work has always stood outside expectations and trends.

Her films surprise - either expressing Francine Prévost holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the Université de Montréal, a B.A. in film from Concordia, and is assistant-director on Georges Dufaux's VHF film Postscriptum: quelques enfants des normes.

too much or too little. Often criticized for her filmic handling of real problems, Anne-Claire has neither wanted to present problems nor give easy answers. Whether it is the question of abortion she is addressing as in Le temps de l'avant (1975) or rape as in Mourir à tue-tête (1979), the important thing to her has been to remain in touch with her own feelings, offering us her perceptions with all their excesses and shortcomings, though without insisting that her perception be the only right one.

To be able to provide some understanding of her latest film, it is not enough to compare La Quarantaine to Mourir à tue-tête. La Quarantaine appears 20 years after Anne-Claire took her first steps as a filmmaker, when she worked as an editor on Clément Perron's film Jour après jour. She has grown since. Yet is it not the fact she is a woman that keeps the public from considering her work as a whole? When Monique Mercure as "la grosse Louise" asks the spectator whether women in their forties are at their peak and, if so, what does their success consist of, it is really a question Anne-Claire is asking herself. For she is not all that sure that women's work is at a peak. And yet, Poirier, who began at the Board in 1960, and made her first short film 30 Minutes, Mister Plummer in 1962, is one of the...
The relationship between art and reality early on became an important question in Poirier's work. Anne-Claire's beginnings at the NFB coincided with a movement at the Board: a movement that clashed with her passionate interest in the theatre, art forms less conducive to illusion than the cinematic style. She was always aware that the truth behind the fiction was never taken in by the distance the camera creates between reality and truth. She was always aware that reality is never that of reality but that of artistic creation. At the beginning of her career as filmmaker, the documentary Maman Plummer was a non-narrative fiction film. It was set in the fictional world of the family. The many flashbacks, the rapid cutting of action-packed scenes (like all the death scenes) alternating with the slow pace of deliberative scenes (like the reading of letters or "la grosse lettre" hesitating before she discovers the dead Tarzan), the abundance of close-ups, the mobile camera, create a tension that forces the spectator to "suspend disbelief," leaving the spectator perplexed.

Anne-Claire Poirier's films are not linear; La Quarantaine is no less dialectical than her other films, although the dialectic may be working in a different way. The many flashbacks, the rapid cutting of action-packed scenes (like all the games and songs) alternating with the slow pace of deliberative scenes (like the reading of letters, "La grosse Louise" hesitating before she discovers the dead Tarzan), the abundance of close-ups, the mobile camera, create a tension that forces the spectator to "suspend disbelief," leaving the spectator perplexed.

As a matter of fact Poirier's films do not tell what we call "a good story"—with her films it is always what we least expect. More than anything else, the導美 without the body by patriarcal society. In her latest film the space of the male does not exist for women. In La Quarantaine this side-by-side presence of men and women that do not form couples is the result of an evolution, a gathering of consciousness that Anne-Claire undergoes parallel to her search for a new form and aesthetic. Her beginnings as a filmmaker at the NFB took place in a world almost exclusively reserved to men. Her films 30 Minutes, Misteer Plummer and La fin des étes were attempts to prove that she, too, could learn the profession of filmmaker. However, when she became pregnant she saw her chances for success diminish. She realized that fatherhood did not change the professional life of any man, but that motherhood, on the other hand, could jeopardize her career. Her film De mere en fille emerged through the body. The body is not a theme in Poirier's films; it is Irving palpable matter. Anne-Claire's interest in the theatre not only allowed her to distance herself from a cinematic style that is more or less conducive to illusion than the one that she works with, but it inspired her, right from the start, with the desire to explore the presence and movement of bodies before the eye of the camera. When she filmed Christophel's "Ike" body of Liette Desjardins in De mere en fille or the mummified body of Danielle Ouimet in Les Filles du Roy or the imaginary trial in Mourir à tue-tête, their presence is always something that feels extreme to the spectator.

Of all her work it is in La Quarantaine that Poirier's fascination with the body is most evident. The cinema has accustomed us to restrained emotion, to discreet bodies, or to decidedly erotic or aggressive ones: therefore the public feels uneasy with the body that cries and laughs if the camera accurates its presence with close-ups. Yet this is what Poirier does in La Quarantaine, even more obviously, and more provocatively so than in all her other films. Bodies touch, hug, and cling out of the usual context of love scenes, with a kind of provocation that brings to mind the innocence of a child. These bodies are fully dressed, but they reveal a new kind of nudity, a less expected one. They expose themselves to us, without shame, wide-open, mouths laughing and crying with gestures of abandonment. Nothing is held back; they hang on to one another, dancing whirling alone, in groups, man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, outside the traditional couple. The rule of acting that imposes restraint on the actor since the camera amplifies every gesture is not respected here at all. Poirier has defied it, tempted as she was to invent a new gestural expression, a new kind of indelicacy. The characters in La Quarantaine seem to be above all bodies, bodies that move about before the eye of the camera. In a restricted space that brings to mind the space of the theatre.

In all of her films, aside from her two short ones where the presence of men was important, Poirier has given body and speech above all to women. The male characters were always discreet—outright negative like the rapist in Mourir à tue-tête, not so triumphant youth to the most tragic agony. Be it the metamorphosis of Christopher Plummer or the "respec-tacle" body of Liette Desjardins in De mere en fille or the mummified body of Danielle Ouimet in Les Filles du Roy or the mummified body of Danielle Ouimet in Les Filles du Roy or the imaginary trial in Mourir à tue-tête, they are the expressions of a new form and aesthetic. Her beginnings as a filmmaker at the NFB took place in a world almost exclusively reserved to men. Her films 30 Minutes, Mister Plummer and La fin des étes were attempts to prove that she, too, could learn the profession of filmmaker. However, when she became pregnant she saw her chances for success diminish. She realized that fatherhood did not change the professional life of any man, but that motherhood, on the other hand, could jeopardize her career. Her film De mere en fille, the first feature made by a woman in Quebec. A few years before the blossoming of the feminist movement in Quebec, Poirier expressed herself in her films with a feminine "T" that some women then called "a narcissistic outburst." Admittedly her words did not have a very strong political or sociological dimension, but were the expression of a category of women caught trying to combine motherhood with a professional career. That film did achieve a certain success when it was shown on TV in the fall of 1968, despite of the fact that it was recommended for adult viewing. This first work of Anne-Claire's, where she expressed herself as woman, was followed by two others within the framework of the "En tant que femmme" series.

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Anne-Claire Poirier’s 
La Quarantaine.

The trauma of mid-life has won star billing in a number of motion pictures, and with widely varying results. Paul Mazursky, for example, virtually smugly submitted the subject to death in his recent Tempest. Gibb sarcasm is not part of Anne-Claire Poirier’s arsenal in La Quarantaine (The Forties), and neither is the gentle, almost slem-flavoured humour of Alan Alda’s The Four Seasons, to which her new film bears a stronger sentimental resemblance. But that absence of ‘comic relief’ is not a saving grace. This National Film Board of Canada, colour 16mm, film is a marked improvement on male/female relations. How do they assess their lives? Have men of power like Tarzan (Jacques Godin) achieved something? Tarzan says to Louise: “I have lived in a world of crazies and I was afraid that I would not succeed... when I look at myself in the mirror I see nobody.” A few hours later he kills himself. The women live in a world of crazies as well but their strength is greater than that of men. This observation reappears as a leitmotiv in all of Poirier’s work — with the exception of Mourir à vue-tête and there she was criticized for not showing women a way out of the rape situation that lead her character to suicide.

Anne-Claire’s commitment to life, awareness and insight into how to disturb us most in La Quarantaine. Tarzan’s despair does not quite reach us because the whole film is centered around a woman brought to life by Monique Mercure, who will not allow destructive forces to survive. She is not affected by Tarzan; she is there to comfort him. She is too wholly positive, with neither weaknesses nor failings — even though she states her regret at always having dispensed comfort, yet never having received it. Tarzan’s grief touches her like a mother who is used to comforting, but not like a person who has known the battle between life and death from experience. When Tarzan says to King: “You are capable of playing at pretending,” the words find an echo in the spectator’s own feelings. But not for one moment does one feel that Poirier is touched by Tarzan’s statement. Wanting to show that the adult is still the child he was, and by choosing a happy, alive, sensitive woman as the central character. Anne-Claire Poirier has stepped into the trap of the happy-childhood myth. The possibility that childhood could have consisted of suffering is totally left out. Yet it is impossible to have nothing but happy memories — why then this insistence to show only that when Tarzan’s suicide opens a new perspective? We get the impression that Louise has been tricked and so have we, as spectators invited by her to this party. Tarzan is right when he says that the whole party is fake. Something very important has been hidden from us.

It is the other, the not said, that is present throughout the film and misses us. In that we suspect of the daily life of these characters is not developed enough to make us believe in the party, their joy at seeing one another again, or Tarzan’s suicide. But maybe we expect too much of a story when we look La Quarantaine, feeling that something precious has been left out. And perhaps Anne-Claire Poirier’s only mistake was to abandon herself to the pleasure she took in those bodies, in the game of moving in and out of past and present, from childhood to adulthood. It is a party for the camera; no doubt about that. And that is why it is the play of bodies, the one that pleases and amazes the most.