Claude Jutra’s
By Design

Inevitably one comes to realize that the vacuum the Applehead left behind filled with nothing. By Design, must also reflect his emotional and artistic alienation in English Canada. The film exhibits a faint imprint of his earlier work, but the medium clearly indicates that the shift which has occurred in his own mind, and in cinematic terms, is leading to the Waterworld of a creative artist. There are few moments where Jutra succeeds in transforming an otherwise unsuccessful venture into a meaningful, touching film.

If we remember that Jutra once said, in 1973, speaking of his and others’ decision to boycott the Canadian Film Awards, the intent on asserting there are two cultures. We have not the same goals, styles, techniques or spirit. You cannot put these two under one roof; we can also better understand what keeps Jutra in Toronto and points west (quoted in Martin Kneilman, “Claude Jutra in Exile,” Saturday Night, March 1977). With the scripts and offers that float about in Toronto, Jutra can keep working (something he can’t do in Montreal, where the industry is based in Quebec), and jump into the North American mainstream. Culture, though, goes deeper than language.

Skill is all he is dedicated to his work — whether the acclaimed Ada, Dreamspeaker or the ill-fated Surfacing — are, I’m sure, his utmost concern. However, his motivation for working with an issue as mental health (as explored in Ada and Dreamspeaker) is very different from what, according to Kneilman, people like Jutra and Genevieve Boulard were doing a decade ago in Kagumara, “dramatizing things they knew in their bones — the exciting intensity is lost when talented people are forced to work on subjects more remote from their own lives.”

Understandably Surfacing did not work out simply because Jutra had little control over the script, and finally the music and editing work were redone by the producer. But the whole question of his work in English Canada or anywhere, is a gnawing one.

In another interview, he stated he dreams to make one film a year in Quebec. For now, he has work in English Canada — such as By Design.

In the film’s opening minute, one senses that Jutra’s approach is ill-conceived and badly executed. In the lead scene, he awkwardly introduces his main characters in a sequence which is disturbing in its juxtapositioning of sharp, upbeat titles — bright orange, and electric blue — pulsating title song, and water-front setting. The camera moves, capturing birds on a pier. It follows two women walking through this setting. Then it cuts to a different locale, a static warehouse interior.

As the film evolves it becomes obvious that By Design is lacking in vibrance and clarity. It never picks up a stride, and its ambi­tion in direction, where Jutra wants it to, is the film’s most serious problem. The film cannot be appreciated as a whole. For instance, the blank titles and raucous soundtrack of the opening do not mix with a later scene in which the camera moves aimlessly in the darkness, finally entering a cabin bathed in golden light, where the two lovers talk about conceiving a baby.

Any attentiveness to character or subject is sparse. Rapid shifts in mood contrast between soft visuals and hard faces and bodies are set against cold, stark, environments — drain the film of any cohesiveness. Any intelligent development in the storyline is often overrun by an insipid scene which follows, or the introduction of a character who appears for one brief scene, never to be seen on screen again. It is impossible to discern the filmmaker’s intent — if Jutra himself was unsure of what he wanted to fashion with this film.

Nor does he seem to recognize his own uncertainty of vision. He has been interviewed saying that his movie expressed, in his own words, “a sense of love — TITS TRANSCENDENT!” This line drew a chuckle and a snort from the audience. But why resort to such cheap exploitation when, in other sections, the actors seriously suggest that they are on the threshold of pain and pleasure? Could Jutra not have extended the possibilities of one or the other to create a more intense argument?

Other shots relay chronic, overpowering sterility, something further from the film’s vision. As the fashion models appear, the camera goes to the crotch, and closes in from below. The world of high fashion is not presented as a critique or portrayal of women without feeling. This is reinforced in that even the designer’s creations which the models are exhibiting have no life of their own. The viewer is left to judge what it is that Jutra portrays.

The man viewing the fashion parade has a tired expression on his face. The “ludicrous” which is repeated many times over in the film is melodramatic and flat. The dialogue is banal. The words which seem to spring from situation comedy, fall flat.

The film’s matter — movement and sound — appear strangely, Perhaps Jutra felt that to counterpose these images would strengthen his central idea, but ultimately, the movie’s images say nothing startling, expressive, or even progressive.

At his best, Jutra is capable of sensibly integrating his characters within their settings and circumstances. But in By Design only a single, brief close-up of the two lead actors conveys their sense of love for each other. Instead, the film is saturated with vulgar, inconsequential details, lacks good pacing, and serves more to mock his actors than present them effectively.

If the film was to have been a bold, inventive, humorous and touching tale, it would have had a different experience. Lacking a coherent structure and tone, the film only serves up a mish-mash of moral overtones and misgivings.

Robert Menard’s
Une Journée en taxi

Chalk up some points for dramatic irony. Just as the Applehead report set off another round of collective hand-wringing, an honest-to-God case in point for the viability of Canadian culture, Une Journée en taxi (Day in a Taxi), tipped sideways into Montreal theatres, did lousy at the box office and disappeared — all this within a scant three weeks and despite the film’s international co-production, the feature director because it flows on even, literal way, and it’s faithful to the film’s vision. Fairness or lack of it is quite beside the point. The fact is that Robert Menard delivered the goods, and that enough anyone here bothered to pick them up. Score zip for the home team.

This delicate, positively luminous little movie belies Menard’s status as a neophyte feature director because it flows with the graceful self-assurance you’d attribute to an accomplished filmmaker, and in a way, that’s precisely what he is. Several years as a feature producer and a ten-year wait before his first shot at directing, no means.

One wonders how Menard premeditated his name for a glowing debut. Une Journée en taxi serves up the special blend of emotional resonance and stylistic clarity that characterizes his film’s lyrics, and it goes one better: this Franco-Canadian co-production is at once so very Quebecois and so blissfully international that it fits easily into the English-Canadian feature-film category, the kind of film that fills a particular cultural context; stock full of universal touchstones. It’s open to anyone who wants to take a look.

This is a road movie in a small-scale, very literal way, and it’s faithful to the genre. The unlikely fellow-travellers...
here are a small-time con on a 36-hour leave from prison, and the jaded French cabbie whose services he leases for a day's drive to nowhere in particular. Michel (Jean Yanne) is a soft-spoken, cultured loner, a man who shut himself off from the world and left accounting for cab-driving eight years ago when his Quebec-born wife died of a heart attack. Very little in this world can provoke a reaction or ruffle his feathers, and that's almost a source of great irritation to his almost hyperkinetic passenger. Johnny (Gilles Renaud) is a perpetual loser with the emotional maturity of an overgrown adolescent and a propensity for waving his thirty-fifth birthday and this short series of financial mishaps during production nearly axed the movie altogether, and that distribution deals for the rest of Canada remain nebulous as of this writing. This was almost the picture that didn't get its lens or perspective viewers our current cultural angst, it should not become the picture that didn't get seen. That would really be a bit too much.

John Juliani's Latitude 55

Having heard almost nothing about Latitude 55 before seeing it, I had few expectations upon entering the theater: the title conjured images of the north, but not the far north of wilderness, but not complete wilderness. As the film unravelled, I found that the expectations which arose in me spontaneously in response to the story were being systematically thwarted, which is as it should be with a well-told story. But by the end of the film I felt that the filmmakers, director John Juliani and co-screenwriter Sharon Rils, had taken this technique too far, had, by presenting scenes over more mysterious and strange, left themselves so fully credibly explained for all its story. If a story is to have maximum effect, it does not detail the link to my own experience, to reality as I unravelled, I found that the expectations which arose in me spontaneously in response to the story were being systematically thwarted, which is as it should be with a well-told story.

The remainder of the film takes place inside Jose's cabin. It begins with a series of financial mishaps during production nearly axed the movie altogether, and distribution deals for the rest of Canada remain nebulous as of this writing. The contrasts between this working class Quebecois and the somewhat erudite Frenchman are beautifully drawn in a wine-tasting lesson in a fancy restaurant is warm and funny, and Jean Yanne's performance is a master-work of subtlety - he extracts as much information from a shrug or shoulder or a raised eyebrow or a single-word dialogue (on which he collaborated with Menardi). The chemistry of the two leads propels the movie forward, but Menardi has dropped in a marvellous stillness, as it should be with a well-told story. The remainder of the film takes place inside Jose's cabin. It begins with a series of financial mishaps during production nearly axed the movie altogether, and distribution deals for the rest of Canada remain nebulous as of this writing. That would really be a bit too much.