

André Forcier's

Au Clair de la lune

"Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays c'est l'hiver," sings Gilles Vigneault in a famous song. Since Voltaire's curt dismissal of Canada as some arpent of snow, winter has been this country's curse just as it has been its fate. Not surprisingly it is a Québécois, André Forcier, who has made the definitive film about our country, winter.

In *Bar Salon* (1975), Forcier's second feature film, winter was in appropriately desolate shades of grey and dirty white, the mud-caked desperation of filthy Februaries, bleak and relentless, an infinity of grey tomorrows in which twice-marginalized human beings (marginalized first by nature then by the economy) still managed to sparkle in the incandescence of their futility.

Au clair de la lune returns to winter but now, in 35mm colour, it is winter as magic, as a carnival of swirling cotton puffs, the candy-cotton stuff of dreams in the silences of eternity. This is winter as a sacred space, a mantle for the creation of life-myths in technicolor.

Here in the quiet of the snow-bound back alleys of Montreal, *Au clair de la lune* tells the story of the friendship of two men who live inside the frozen hulk of a green 1971 Chev in a parking lot behind the Moonshine Bowling alley.

François "Frank" (Michel Côté) is an Albino from the mythic land of Albinie. Albert "Bert" Bolduc (Guy L'Écuyer) is a former bowling champion, reduced by arthritis to a human billboard for the Moonshine. Chased through the alleys by the Dragons, the local authority figures who drive their souped-up cars on tireless rims as sparks stream forth like roman candles, Bert finds Frank seemingly frozen to death and brings him back to life.

"Au clair de la lune" is also a French children's song, the second and third lines of which go: "Prêtes-moi ta plume pour écrire un mot, ma chandelle est morte, je n'ai plus de feu" (Lend me your pen so that I can write, my candle has died and I'm out of fire). The film *Au clair de la lune*, then, would seem to be about the role of art in the service of the Resurrection.

In this space between life and death, Forcier deploys the characters that inhabit his obsessions. Under the winking lights of the nighttime neons of the urban *néant*, the shuffling shadows of the lumpen proletariat dissolve to take on human form: Ti-Kid Radio (Gaston Lepage) in his fringed leather jacket delivering smoked-meat sandwiches on his bike for the Rainbow Sweets restaurant, riding on tireless rims and talking only in English CB dialect as he dreams of becoming a Dragon; Léopoldine Dieumegarde (Lucie Miville), another of Forcier's precocious girl-women, as The Maniac who goes around puncturing car tires in a desperate, loving bid to save her father's recycled-tire business from bankruptcy; or Alfred, custodian of the Moonshine, who shares his Valium with Ti-Beu, his dog and companion in senility.

It is a world seen through the frozen bottom of an empty bottle of Benylin cough syrup, the local champagne. If it is a world where all that glitters is not gold, at least the pile of quarters that Franks earns running a tire-protection

racket do gleam, as do the characters' eyes when they light up with manic inspiration.

Here - even here - hope springs eternal and fantasies have their own necessity as that cynical myth-maker Frank knows as he schemes to cure Bert's arthritis and so allow him to make a comeback at the Moonshine tournament.

Au clair de la lune is an ascension - from the lower depths to those peaks of experience from where, in the words of Frank's wonderfully cynical voice-over, "at last you can savor the miracle of life" and recall "the follies of our winters." Frank 'cures' Bert's arthritis and Bert makes a comeback beyond his wildest dreams. But, as Frank narrates, "the last folly is always the one you must expiate."

After the initial violence of the shock of mortality, the fall back into the depths is as gentle as the flutter of the surrounding snow. All of a sudden Bert's hair is as white as Frank's who had upon this day promised to take Bert to Albinie.

Huddled in their car as the great cold sets in, at last out of fire except for one final bottle of tournament champagne, the two friends, now purified as Albert and François, prepare to discover that Albinie is Death. As the Moonshine parking lot echoes with their hilarity at the thought they will be "congealed like Walt Disney", the snow falls softly covering the roof of the green Chev. *Hiberna vincit omnia*.

To die congealed is to die in a state of suspended animation. This posits resurrection - but only as in the case of Disney, whose body was cryonized, as a technological intervention. When Frank says, "At least the worms won't eat us until summer," this denotes the residue of a belief in resurrection as myth ("summer") and as a process of natural teleology (worms) that is at the same time implicitly denied by the locus of death (inside a car, moveable technology). For without resurrection, life is simply a story of progressive putrefaction.

Already under the weight of winter, life is stunted, frozen and immobilized; and life myths are not certainties, merely delusions. Against winter's frozen eter-

nity, life becomes a corruption. Behind the magical illusions of *Au clair de la lune* a soundless scream points to the horrors of impossible existence.

In Forcier's horror-filled vision these diminished human beings shit and piss, bleed and pustulate. They are not the living dead but, worse, the rotting living, tumbling towards a meaningless death buoyed upon the froth of their illusions. Forcier (who always slips himself into his films as either retarded, mute or an idiot), because he cannot bear to articulate the truth, contents himself with dumb-struck descriptions of the opium of the people that are the people themselves.

Yet in the face of the anti-humanism of winter, Forcier, much like the society of the inhabitants, can only reach for another anti-humanism, that of technology. Perhaps in (literally) animating the depths of the delusions of his characters, it was his way of drawing attention to them. Instead, the animation technology only produces their gross manipulation. In this sense, *Au clair de la lune* is Forcier's most cynical film: for nothing, not even art, can save these wretched creatures. And the price we pay for winter (for living in the techno-state) is an eternal condemnation to colorful futility.

While *Au clair de la lune* is manifestly Forcier's vision, many people helped realize it. Voltaire, of course, and E.M. Cioran, the Roumanian Nietzsche, get screen credits for providing philosophical inspiration. The screenplay is shared between producers Louis Laverdière and Bernard Lalonde, L'Écuyer, Forcier, Côté, long-time collaborator Jacques Marcotte and Forcier's neighbor, filmmaker Michel Pratt. Other veterans of the Forcier *équipe* include regular DOP François Gill who is also the editor of the film. *Au clair de la lune* was co-produced with the National Film Board who lent the unmistakable signature of Sidney Goldsmith for the special animation effects and made it possible for *Au clair* to be properly completed. In Bert, Guy L'Écuyer has delivered a diamond-hard performance of brilliant bathos and Michel Côté's Frank has all the sorrow of stardust. Joël

Bienvenue's mocking musical score adds just the right touch of persiflage. *Au clair de la lune* is a film of immense sadness. For in the absence of the Resurrection is the Life: *this* life, such as it is.

Appropriately then, *Au clair de la lune* was plagued with completion problems, yet another example of the kinds of crucifixions that chronically keep Canadian art from Canadians. Along the lines of the same principle, it is equally unlikely that *Au clair de la lune* will receive the wide distribution it deserves outside Quebec. In Quebec, however, thanks to the heroic efforts of the independent distributor Cinéma Libre, of which Forcier is one of the co-founders, the film will get what he calls a "normal" distribution.

In a sense the timing is perfect. In *Au clair de la lune*, this *Wunderkind* of Quebec cinema (who began making films at 19) has effected a fascinating synthesis of his two earlier features, *Bar Salon* and *L'eau chaude l'eau frotte* (1976). If the former film was bleak to the point of despair (though balanced against the hard pretension of its realism) the latter was too much of a sitcom, sacrificing its cutting edge for the respite of a mid-summer's eve. Not for nothing was *L'eau chaude* acclaimed in Italy where its spirit was recognized as Mediterranean. But this says more about the climactic schizophrenia of Canada where summer is the illusion and winter the reality.

Au clair de la lune confirms Forcier - now 35 - in his true stature as the bard of these winters of our discontent. Yet though rooted in this quintessentially Canadian context, *Au clair de la lune* also transcends it to achieve a superior universality through its concentration on what Hannah Arendt, in a comment on Chaplin, called "the entrancing charm of the little people."

Forcier, as reclusive as Howard Hughes, had skipped town for the press screening of the film over which he has labored since 1979. He left in his wake one sentence, like the tail of a comet: "I sought in the time of a life a sort of space that would contain the smallness of the century." He did not need to add that that space could only be a coffin; appropriately a North American car.

Michael Dorland ●

AU CLAIR DE LA LUNE d. André Forcier
 exec. p. Bernard Lalonde, Louis Laverdière p. dir.
 Laverdière, Marthe Pelletier p. co-ord. Edouard
 Davidovici p. asst. René Deniger, Roland Carrier,
 Jean-Paul Lebourhys, Michel Toutan, Fabrice Gabi-
 land loc. man. Suzanne Girard, Michel Siry sc.
 Forcier, Jacques Marcotte, Michel Pratt, Guy L'Écuyer,
 Michel Côté, Bernard Lalonde asst. sc. Michele
 Leduc, Marthe Pelletier a.d. Pierre Gendron, Marie-
 André Brouillard art d. Gilles Aird tech. dir. Forcier,
 François Gill d.o.p. François Gill, André Gagnon
 asst. cam. Michel Caron, Daniel Vincelette key
 grip Marc de Ernsted grip Jean-Maurice de Ernsted
 gaffer Richer Francoeur, head: Jean Courteau,
 Denis Menard, Jacques Girard sd. ed. Mathieu
 Decary sd. asst. Alain Corneau, Marcel Fraser
 props Patrice Benge, Louis Craig sp. efx. Louis
 Laverdière, Sidney Goldsmith cost. des. François
 Laplante ward. Diane Paquet make-up Mickie
 Hamilton set des. Gilles Aird neg. cut. Dagmar
 Gueissaz stunt dir. Marcel Fournier sd. efx. Ken
 Page opt. efx. sup. Louis Laverdière opt. efx.
 prep. Walter Howard, Susan Gourley mixer Jean-
 Pierre Joutel, Adrian Groll music comp. Joël Bien-
 venue mus. sup. Catherine Gadouas mus. rec.
 Louis Hone, Joël Bienvenue lab. Bellevue-Pathé,
 NFB color comp. Gundrun Kanz, André Gagnon
 cast. cons. Lise Abastados unit pub. Marie Decary
 dist. (word-wide) Cinema Libre, 35mm color,
 running time: 90 min. p.c. Les Productions Albinie
 lp. Guy L'Écuyer, Michel Côté, Lucie Miville, Robert
 Gravel, Michel Gagnon, Gaston Lepage, J.-Leo
 Gagnon, Ti-beu, Elise Varo, Louise Gagnon, Pierre
 Girard, Marcel Fournier, Gilles Lafleur, Yvon Le-
 compte, Charlie Beauchamp, Stéphane L'Écuyer,
 Dino des Laurentides, Gros-Louis.

