

FILM REVIEWS

trovery, even before its release. In the minds of both those who love it and hate it, it has become far more than just a film about a particular area of a particular city. It is a travelogue presenting us with an overview of a state of mind, the chronic, hereditary disease known as poverty. In an odd way, this is a courageous film because it does not present a fashionably left of center "running-Capitalist-dogs" view of poverty. Also, it is not an up-reaching fiction, skilfully fashioned to forge the masses into organized revolt. If anything, *The Point* is a film of "constatation" and the poverty in it is ugly, brutal, corrosive and ultimately enfeebling.

It would be wrong, however, to represent this lively film as a modern day, Dickens-like portrait of bleakness. The hour is exciting, full of energy and, in its own way, more emotionally and sociologically true than many a more "worthy" film on the same subject. *The Point* and its people are themselves exciting, and the characters presented on the screen are as alive and fighting as the Point St. Charles working class heroes of David Fennario's plays. For example, it is the first film which I have seen that overtly faces the fact of racial tension between the French and English of Montreal. To anyone growing up in the rougher parts of Montreal, the two solitudes are often bridged with rocks and fists. As the film wryly puts it... "In Canada it is widely believed that all the French in Quebec are poor and all the English are rich. They have heard that story in Point St. Charles, but they have trouble believing it." Nowadays, *The Point* is no longer 100 percent Irish working poor. Not only are the poor of the area no longer exclusively Irish, they are no longer working. Jobs have moved away from this formerly industrial area, replaced by street crime, charred buildings and monthly welfare checks. The cycle of poverty continues and the children learn the ropes quickly.

The Point is not the first voyage that the National Film Board has taken across the tracks. *Things I Cannot Change*, a stinging *cinéma vérité* portrait of a poor family from the same area is the film that inspired the NFB's Challenge for Change program. That film presented a family of nine children

headed by a weakling father in such a devastating light that the family was forced to move out of the area. *Calabogie Fiddler* by Peter Pearson is among the best dramatic films produced by the National Film Board. Set in the rural Ottawa Valley, this film also reinforces our stereotyped image of the drinking, brawling Irish. As with *Things I Cannot Change*, this powerful, energetic — and in many ways too honest — film was very poorly received in the region which it portrayed. Challenge for Change's response to these films was to make films not just about, but for, disadvantaged groups. A film such as *VTR St. Jacques* illustrates a group organizing its way out of economic repression. These films are not portraits, nor do they pretend to be typical of what is going on. Their aim and purpose are not filmic but inspirational.

The Point brings us down from these lofty heights. It gives this area, not to the local social activists fighting for lower rents, but to the nightly arsonists and to the mailmen with their six-million dollars in welfare checks. The film is particularly telling in its view of the kids, the kids "without any dreams" who do not worry about the diminishing job market because, "we're all strong workers down here, ya know." As a former resident who has succeeded in moving out of the area puts it, "they have struck out down here. I see people suffering with alcohol and sickness. I'm not proud of that, but they have a lot of guts to put up with it." And it is this spirit which comes through in the film, the spirit of a neighbourhood which is now almost no more, the spirit of the ancestors who arrived half-starved on the ships a hundred years ago, and finally, the spunk of the young people still ready for a fight, whatever the odds. The film does not leave us with feelings of despair or helplessness, but with a very unromantic view of poverty. The slums are not pretty, the people want out, and the lucky ones make it.

Ronald Blumer

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