

Jean-Claude Labrecque

The filmmaker as Mnemosyne

by Michael Dorland

"We all know that one of the greatest weaknesses common to the people of Quebec is their short memory." — Pierre Vallières

"Combien le problème national est plus tragique pour les petits peuples!" — E.M. Cioran

If Socrates feared that the book would "create forgetfulness in the learners' souls because they will not use their memories," how much more terrified he would have been by the impact of the image in the acceleration of collective forgetfulness. Yet what makes the work of Quebec director Jean-Claude Labrecque outstanding is that his films concentrate so singlemindedly on the image precisely as the refuge of memory.

But as the French film theorist Jean Mitry once wrote, "The image is not an ending, it is a beginning. One will never understand cinema as long as one considers the representation as the end-term of the filmmaker's proposition." In this sense — and perhaps the reason why Labrecque is little known outside Quebec, the ancestral home of Canadian memory — it is because he is so uniquely a filmmaker of the images of our beginning.

A curious statement to make of a man now in his forties whose filmmaking career began at the age of 19, but it does suggest some of the extraordinary richness of Labrecque's contribution to Canadian film in general and Quebec film in particular as the recording of the memory of a country that does not yet exist. Paradoxical as that may seem, it is

immediately less so when one considers that Labrecque's work has always been situated at the center of the Canadian filmmaking project; indeed, is defined by the presumption of a distinctly Canadian identity.

As a result Labrecque's filmmaking divides neatly into two types: the films he made while at the National Film Board (1959-'66), and those he made outside, though he was still freelancing at the Board. As a cameraman with the NFB, his work in documentaries, notably *60 Cycles* (1964), has been described as "a virtual encyclopedia of camera technique." From cameraman, he became director of photography working with Canada's First Wave directors like Claude Jutra (*À Tout prendre*: 1962-2), Gilles Groulx (*Le chat dans le sac*: 1964), Gilles Carle (*La vie heureuse de Léopold Z*: 1965), or Don Owen (*Notes On A Film About Donna and Gail*: 1965; *The Ernie Game*: 1967), as part of that first authentic generation of Canadian feature filmmakers created by the Board largely through the heroic abilities of Jacques Bobet, the producer-poet.

In 1971 Labrecque began his first feature film, *Les smattes* (1972), which would be followed by three other features: *Les vautours* (1975), *L'Affaire Coffin* (1979), the first of Quebec's few French-language tax-shelter films. This summer Labrecque shot *Les années de rêve*, the sequel to *Les Vautours* and the second of a trilogy. With the sound editing recently completed, *Les années de rêve* is to be released in March '84.

Labrecque himself classifies his filmmaking according to three categories:

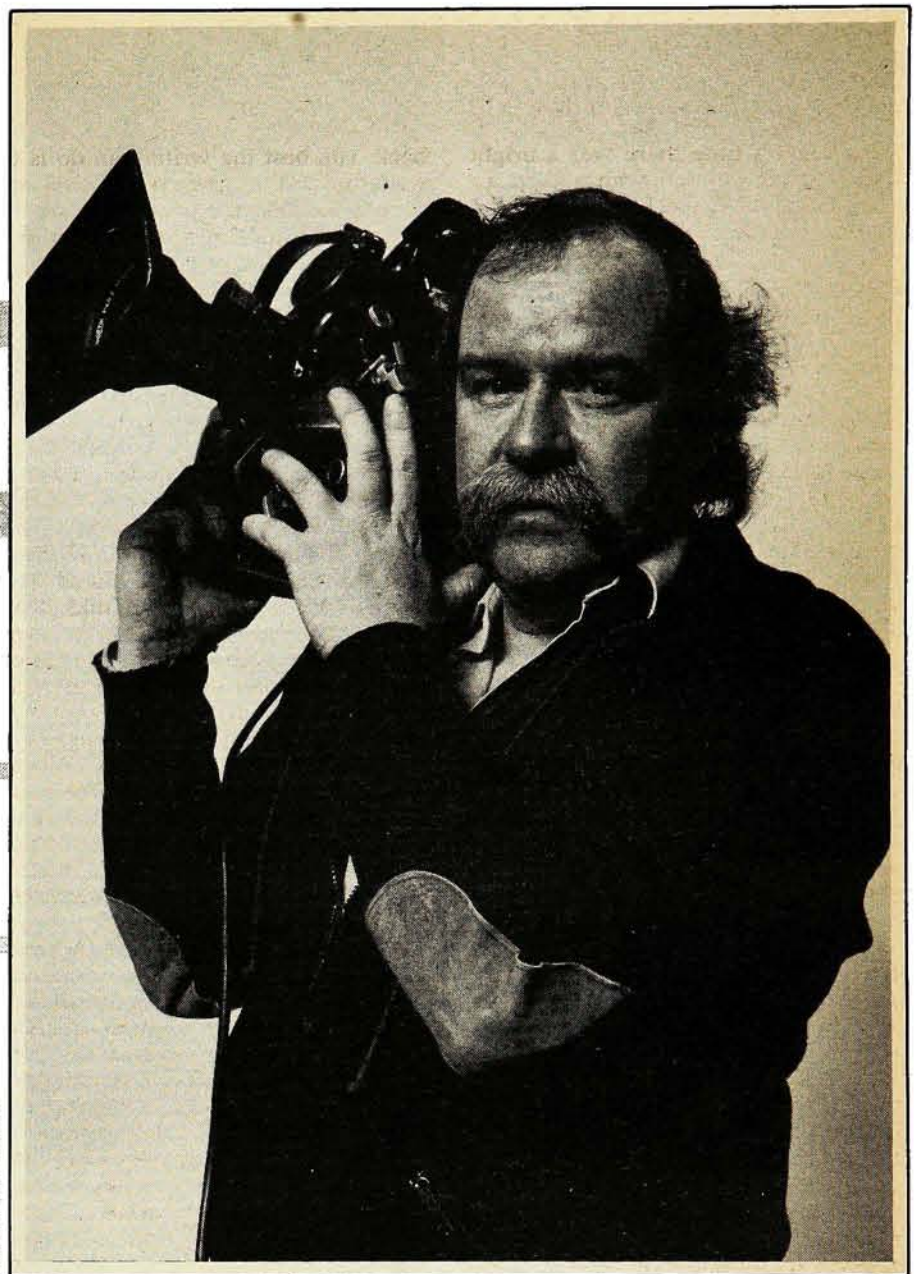


Photo: Ron Levine

the documentaries, like *60 Cycles* or *Games of the XXI Olympiad* (1976), he calls "physical films"; the documentaries about language (*Nuit de la poésie*: 1970, 1980, *Claude Gauvreau — poète*: 1975; *Marie Uquay*: 1982; see sidebar) and the features that are about memory. One can thus characterize Labrecque's films as the mediated interplay or synthesis of three basic human sensibilities: the sense of touch, the verbal sense, and memory as the historical sense. It is the latter, however, that from the perspectives of the cultural function of cinema, most visibly informs and reflects Labrecque's filmmaking as the elaboration of a cultural project.

For unlike the documentaries, which are sensually affirmative, the features attempt something far more delicate: the preservation of memory from the institutional-historical-epochal threats that surround it. Labrecque's features describe a rising spiral of cultural obliteration: in *Les smattes*, of a Gaspé village; in *Les vautours*, of a young man's past and future; in *L'Affaire Coffin*, the judicial obliteration of a human life; and in *Les années de rêve*, of collective memory. (The third part of the trilogy will tackle the obliteration of civilization.)

In Labrecque's films, man is pitted in a losing battle against forces he cannot control: the State (*Les smattes*, *L'Affaire Coffin*), Nature (as fire and forest in *Les smattes*, as death in *Les vautours*), History and Technology (the former in *Les vautours*, both in *Les années de rêve*). Yet this fragile, sure-to-be-defeated creature that is man possesses, against

the titanic powers allied against him, one possible defense: his memory, the present knowledge that it has been/could be/will be otherwise. For Labrecque, memory is the beginning-point of his feature filmmaking.

"When I do features," the 44-year-old director said in a recent interview with Cinema Canada, "I'm speaking of things of the past while in the making of documentaries I'm speaking of the contemporary, the actual. When I shoot a documentary, it's the present, it's today; when I shoot features it's to remember and there are several reasons for that: many things have happened to us here and as the events happen very rapidly we soon forget everything."

"I greatly admire Italian cinema because they began by digging deeply into their past, into their own stories — history and story are the same word in Italian — and we just don't do enough of that. It's terribly important for the future of Quebec cinema that we speak about the past. I think it's something we have to do and do more of; sure, we can do it in different ways than we have done, but we have to do it. Me, at any rate, that's what I want to do."

Easier said than done, especially in a country whose cultural institutions are as tenuous as Canada's, whose film industry is so essentially one-dimensional, and whose film-going public by and large prefers images from elsewhere. In Labrecque's case, even after two features, it would take five years to put together *L'Affaire Coffin*, belatedly with the help of the CFDC, and *Les vautours* would never have been done without

the support of the then-newly created Institut québécois du cinéma.

"*Les vautours*," Labrecque recalls, "was so hard to get off the ground! The public hardly knows our films — and without a public our filmmaking has no continuity. So it's hard: filmmakers get tired, they get sick, they go and do other, easier things for a living, and in the end never manage to make their films."

"*Les années de rêve*, too, would have been impossible if the Institut did not exist. But they supported it because of *Les vautours*. For the CFDC on the other hand, *Les années de rêve* was just not acceptable: it's not part of their mentality at the moment, it's not trendy. The trend is for television mini-series, not a bad thing in itself, but all of a sudden there's nothing else and that's not a happy turn of events. Certainly it's important that there be work to do, but there's a tendency towards one-dimensionality. So nowadays it's series and no-one thinks of anything else. Films get made, but there's something missing."

"I don't know why it's that way. There seems to be no overview. Once it was the filmmakers themselves who generated projects, today we're into a new era of producers, and that's a job which just didn't used to exist before — or rather there were very few producers. Certainly it's a tough job being a producer, having to go and find the money, to get projects going, but the real problem remains one of style: how to find a style that is our own without being derivative?"

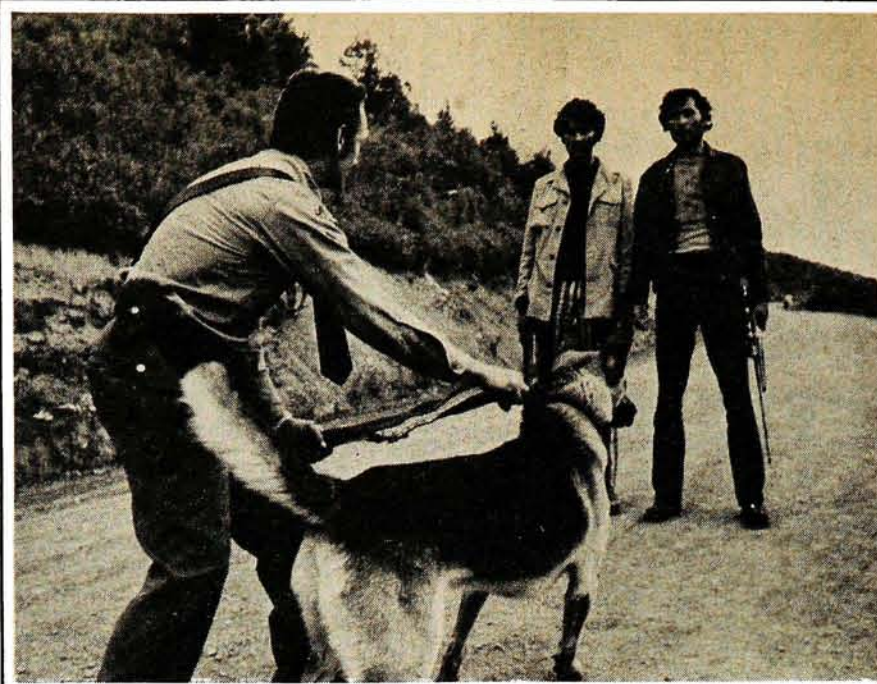
"And the big problem of Canadian filmmaking is how to find that style. So few of our films are original, and that's especially evident when you look at the films that get made in Toronto: they're well-made films, but they're imitations, even if they do good imitations. Some aren't — Allan King's films, for instance. *Who Has Seen The Wind* was a magnificent film, with style. But they're rare, so rare. (Gilles) Carle used to say that we're condemned to be original. It's true. We have to find that style or else we're dead."

Search for a style: *Les smattes*

"My feature filmmaking is a loyalty to memory," says Labrecque, "and that is as true of *Les années de rêve* as it is for *Coffin* or *Les smattes* with all the naivety that film possesses."

In *Les smattes*, the Quebec government has decided to uproot a dozen villages in the hard and arid lands of upper Gaspé. Thirty years earlier, the area had been colonized by mistake, as an erroneous reading of the map sent hundreds of men, women and children on the futile attempt to reclaim forest lands for agricultural purposes. As they cannot manage to grow anything, the villagers subsist on welfare. Now the government decides to urbanize the villagers and orders the villages' shut-down.

Despite their poverty, the villagers lived as free as the air the sweeps down from the high plateaus into the valleys below. Two brothers (played by Donald and Daniel Pilon), about as old as the village itself and so its memory in human form, decide to resist the expropriation, only to be hunted by the Provincial Police into the forests. The price of resistance is to become an outlaw. The film instead of ending, simply concludes with "To Be Continued", a suggestion that one day perhaps the two brothers (and others?) will survive to be part of the great historical settling of scores in the re-establishment of severed me-



● Men and beast in confrontation in *Les smattes*

mory. *Les smattes* is the most optimistic of Labrecque's features.

Part-documentary (filming the real-life expropriation and burning of the village of St-Paulin Dalibaire), part-fiction, *Les smattes* is also the most dualistic of Labrecque's films. Beginning with the title, a corruption of "Les Smarts", itself a corruption of the two national languages, fundamental dualisms and ambiguities echo throughout. The (rational?) government attempts to rectify its original, irrational mistake, but the government itself shows two faces: the friendly sociologists who attempt to persuade the villagers to move in the name of greater economic opportunity, and on the other hand, the brutal police who not only oblige the brothers to take to the woods but also kill Donald Pilon's girlfriend. Nature is both a refuge and also a danger: it provides shelter but not food. The brothers' memory of freedom past is the condition for a possible, collective, future liberty. The film points

to dualisms in Labrecque's style. The wide-angle, hi-tech aerial photography of the long chase scene is characteristic of Labrecque's physical films, alternating with the immobile camera and single take (of the priest's sermon) that Labrecque would employ in the language films. Yet containing all these dualisms is the film itself: the feature form as the synthetic attempt to imagine (and so preserve) a moment of memory's loss. Labrecque put it nicely at the time of *Les smattes*'s release in 1972 when he said that the film "is ambiguous from beginning to end. But ours is a country like that."

Memory in black and blue: *Les vautours*

Les vautours is Labrecque's most literally memorable film to date. Above all, it profoundly illustrates the power of memory to haunt and disturb. A hostile reviewer writing in Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir* when *Les vautours* was first

released in 1975, accused Labrecque of dealing in "faded phantasms", decrying the film's "desolation and deathliness." The ghostliness of *Les vautours*, however, has endured in the years since, spooking not only humans but machines as well. Radio-Canada's computer, when the network ran the film this summer, automatically corrected *Les vautours*' black-and-blue colour, and in 400 operations converted the print to the undisturbing familiarity of black-and-white!

"The love I bear for the characters, in fact everything I know about them, comes from memory," says Labrecque of this his most personal, and at the same time most historical, film.

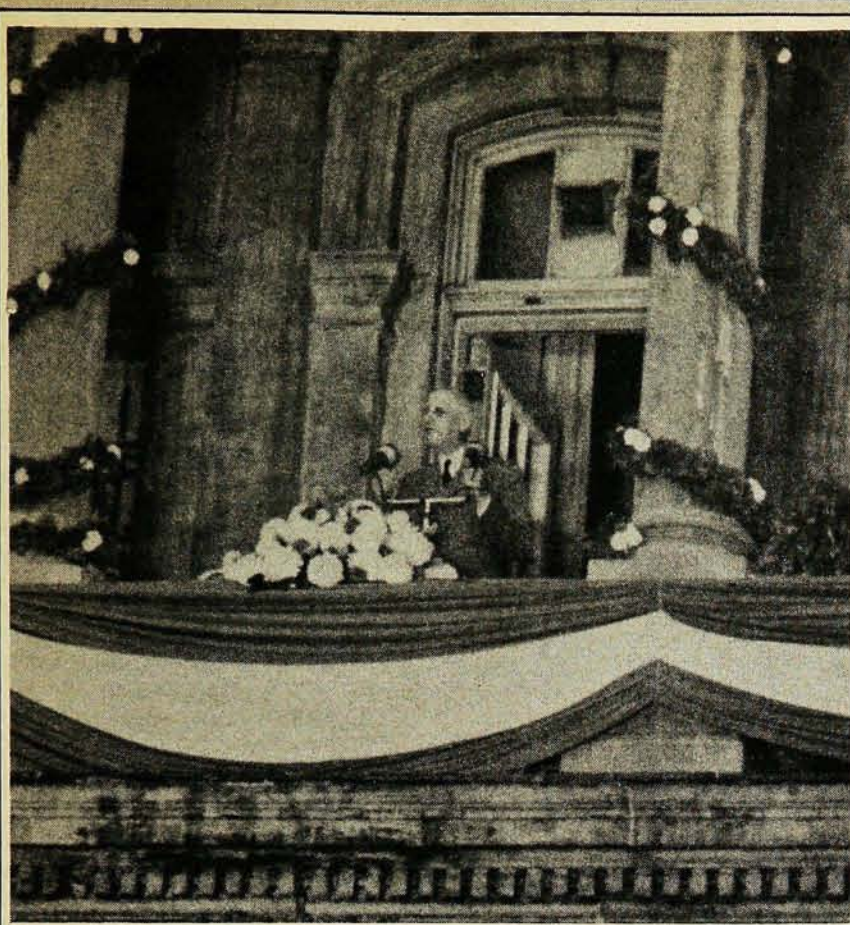
Like Labrecque himself who was orphaned very young, Louis Pelletier (Gilbert Sicotte) in *Les vautours* becomes orphaned thrice-over. There's the death of his father (which occurs before the film begins), the death of his mother (early in the film), and finally the death of Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis (at the end of the film, which begins with Louis, at his mother's urging, going to see *le Chef* for a job).

Bounded by the trinity of Death, *Les vautours* is film's exorcism of memory. For to be orphaned is, in a sense, to be given over to memory. And so armed with his memories, Louis at 17 sets about creating a space for himself, planning vaguely to be either a musician or a photographer. He has a girlfriend and, from his mother's estate, a house to live in and some money. He is free, or almost.

In this situation descend the surviving members of his family, the parish priest, the local nuns, and they, behind his back, conspire to strip him of everything, just as they divide Louis' mother's belongings among themselves. The dead are safe in memory: it is the living who are the vultures of the film's title. They sell the house and invest a small portion of the left-over money towards Louis' majority. His last 'connection' to the historical present, the job with Duplessis that he didn't want, vanishes when Duplessis himself dies. Louis' bitter cry at the end of the film, against documen-



● *Les vautours*' crew in Maurice Duplessis' National Assembly office



● Gen. De Gaulle in Montreal, uttering the famous "Vive le Québec libre"

The filmmaker as witness

"After the physical films like *60 Cycles* or *The Olympics*, I did a whole series of films on language where the camera does nothing but listen. One could mention *La vie* (1968) with Félix Leclerc, *Claude Gauvreau-poète* (1975), the two *Nuits de la poésie* (1970, 1980), or more recently *Marie Uguay* (1982). They were films strictly about language; I can't distribute them outside a French-speaking country; you can't subtitle them, so strictly speaking these are truly national films.

"If you take *Nuit de la poésie* (1970) and *Nuit de la poésie* (1980), you've got 10 years of the history of writing: these are archival films, you could run them on the radio, they're films about language, filmed words, and they improve with age since they weren't seen as very good when they came out. *Nuit de la poésie* (1970) was a difficult film to watch: people come and recite poems and it's shot very square, and the '80 one is the same.

"I became interested in language and though I hardly knew any poetry at all, I thought I'd go and see what was going on, as if I'd guessed that these films would only matter, one day in the future. But it's amazing to see a poet like Gaston Miron, or Michèle Lalonde reciting "Speak White" in 1970; it's terrifying. It was terrifying to shoot those spoken documentaries: the camera didn't intervene. The spoken word is anguishing: you don't know what is going to be said, you don't know that before you shoot. I was a little scared,

and I kept myself out of it.

"It's often like that in documentaries. It was like that with DeGaulle (*La visite du général de Gaulle au Québec*, 1967): it was watching DeGaulle one Sunday morning. You're standing by the side of the road, and zoom - there he went and that was it. What was interesting with DeGaulle were his speeches, and how the level rose. In Louiseville, he'd say, "You are taking your decisions in your own hands", then in Drummondville he'd say, "You are one people and we await you." It was always rising slowly. So when he said the famous "Vive le Québec libre", it was a shock of course, but what he'd said before was even stronger: "All along my journey to Montreal I've found myself back in the atmosphere of the Liberation". Even the most separatist of Québécois was taken aback.

"All those films even a marginal film like *Claude Gauvreau*, were made possible by working in a place called The National Film Board of Canada.

"It was an extraordinary period and only the NFB could produce that kind of film - films for the future. Nobody else would have done films that like that and yet the Board did.

"And sadly, that time is over: the Board has no more money, no more energy; to make a film today they have to ask Radio-Canada's permission and if it doesn't suit Radio-Canada it doesn't get done. Thanks to the Board I was able to make films that were impossible to do anywhere else, impossible. And I'm very proud to have been a part of that."

tary footage of Duplessis' funeral cortege, is to 'thank' both his family and Duplessis for having left him with nothing. The exorcism is complete and Louis, like Quebec society at the beginning of the Quiet Revolution, severed from the past and uncertain as to the future, is thrust into the void of the historyless present.

Memory in French and English : L'Affaire Coffin

Unable to proceed with the sequel to *Les vautours*, Labrecque's next feature, completed four years later, would be *L'Affaire Coffin* (1979). In the mid-'60s, journalist and publisher (now Senator) Jacques Hébert had waged a Zola-like crusade to rehabilitate the memory of Wilbur Coffin, an Anglophone Gaspésien, accused, tried and hanged in 1956 for the 1953 murder of three American hunters.

L'Affaire Coffin is a return to many of the themes of *Les smattes*. As a period piece, it is a filmed reconstruction of memory. "I think everybody was so helpful," said Labrecque of the extensive cooperation given him by government officials during the shooting of the film, "because they remembered the Coffin case and were still interested in it." Indeed, the heart of the case and Coffin's refusal to testify on his own behalf, becomes a conflict between judicial and private memory, a conflict furthermore with its roots in the collective Québécois memory itself. The fact the victims were American (and that the murder had potential implications that could affect Quebec tourism) further added to the Coffin case as a playing-out of symbolic hatreds.

"*Coffin*," says Labrecque, "was the story of an English minority being per-

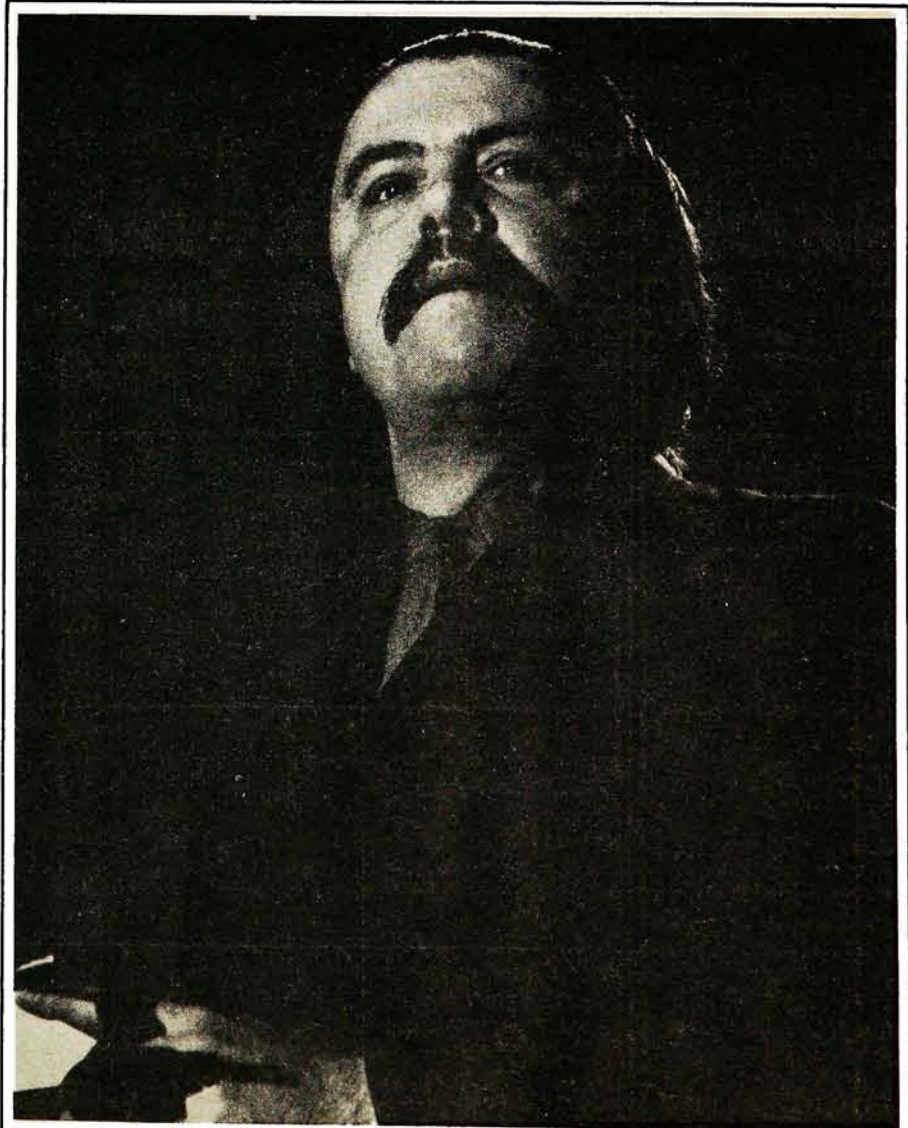
secuted by the Québécois majority." Yet it was precisely this symbolic - and prophetic - dimension of the film that would be lost when *Coffin* ran on Canadian television in 1981. "A terrible thing happened when the film ran on English television," recalls Labrecque. "They made the monumental error of translating the whole film into English wall-to-wall and so that part about the presence of an English minority in Quebec just vanished. And let me tell you, in English, the film is bo-o-ring; it's just flat."

Coffin's silence, followed by his execution, reflects the destruction of lived memory, and a bleaker turn in Labrecque's filmmaking. Memory, in Labrecque's vision, must summon forth resistance; without resistance there is only obliteration. If *Les smattes* and even *Les vautours* were still ambiguous enough for there to be some room for hope, there is none in *L'Affaire Coffin* and even less in *Les années de rêve*.

Memory as Calvary : Les années de rêve

"*Les années de rêve*," says Labrecque, "is set between '64-'70. It's not long ago and yet when I look at the archival material we've got, when I look at footage of the Murray Hill strike, or DeGaulle's visit in '67 that I shot myself, or the '68 Chicago Democratic Convention, the hippies and all that, these are all images that we've forgotten - it's as though we've forgotten it all."

Similarly, Louis Pelletier, whose story resumes in *Les années de rêve*, during the years of the dream, finds his own memory so completely swamped by events that he cannot remember who he is. Louis' life is effaced by the images of life, because the images are not the



● Claude Gauvreau, a suicide at 41, but remembered in Labrecque's *Claude Gauvreau - poète*

redemption of life, but its obliteration. Says Labrecque:

"Louis is branded by the events to the '60s and they pull him down because he never gets free of them. The Quiet Revolution, the Lesage years, he believed in all those beginnings: he believed in the FLQ, he believed in DeGaulle, he believed in the possibility of some kind of real country. So he waited for it all to happen, waited for something, he didn't know what, only that when it did, it would be marvelous. What he goes through is a Calvary.

"He's a wonderful dreamer, of course, but he's lacking something fundamental - maturity, or a lack of continuity that goes back to the non-existence of the father. He's a member of our lost generation that came out of the Duplessis era."

Effaced by the images of his time, Louis becomes an absence, a kind of ghost (the kind who would, Labrecque explains, vote "No" in the 1980 independence referendum, in the final act of killing the dream). In the face of the domination of the image ("Just to retrieve those images," Labrecque recalls, "we spent a fortune, completely out of proportion to the film's budget, to go to New York and buy three minutes of footage of the '68 Chicago riots"), the film shifts its emphasis from Louis to his wife Claudette (Anne-Marie Provencher) and, parallel, from the images themselves to the sound-track.

"*Les années de rêve*," says Labrecque, "is a very rich film on the level of the sound editing which adds a wholly other dimension. Musically, the entire period was a renaissance and you hear the rise of the music - (Robert) Charlebois, Bob Dylan, especially 'A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall'. At the beginning of the sound-track, when Louis and Claudette get married, there's American music with Québécois words, truly horrible, and then slowly the sonic changes occur: the Beatles, Dylan, and Charlebois.

"At the same time, Louis' wife steps back from him, develops a broader way of thinking, and affirms herself more and more. *Les années de rêve* is a film that's hard on the men of Quebec, but not only the men, it's hard on the couple, on the life of the '60s couple who got married too young, before they were ready, like the generation before them.

"And while the wife was at home, the man had to go out and find a job and solidify though he wasn't yet old enough, and what with work and children, the dream that the couple once might have shared dies, and the couple breaks up. Oh, they both come out of it all right, but diminished.

"It's gloomy, but perhaps all the dreams of that period were false dreams."

Condemned to be original

False dreams, false memories, false images? No, for that would be to disregard Mitry's wise suggestion and forget that the filmmaker's images are not the end-terms of his reflections, but forever the beginning. In Freudian terms, the image (memory's trace) preserves within itself the beginnings of consciousness. And so, fittingly, Labrecque's filmmaking brings one back to the consciousness of the present, to the ever-present awareness of Canadian creativity as the balancing act between the threat of cultural obliteration and the condemnation to be original.

"It's like snow: it keeps falling and all you can do is go on shovelling," says Labrecque. "It's the same for the filmmaker."



● Remembrance of things past as the family gets together in *Les années de rêve*



● August Schellenberg as Wilbur Coffin escaping from the Quebec City jail in *L'Affaire Coffin*, only to be sent back by his lawyer