Quebec’s “hobos of cinema”:

a manifesto

by Pascal Gelinas

It gives me great pleasure on behalf of Richard Boutet, co-director of the film La Turlute des années dures and Lucille Veilleux, producer, both of whom were detained outside Montreal, to accept the Louis-Ernest-Quimet-Molson prize awarded by the Association des critiques du cinema. This is a prize which we view highly, a prize that belongs to us as Quebeccois and which is democratically awarded by people whose job it is to communicate their emotions and reflections to the public concerning cinema from here and elsewhere.

Their choice was surely a difficult one to make, and we are convinced that the five finalist films would also have deserved this honor as each testifies in its own fashion to the astonishing vitality of our cinema, each bringing to our cinematography a unique and original contribution.

It is for us a very great honor to receive this prize, after three-and-a-half years of passionate, systematic and collective work.

But we believe that this prize is given equally to the entire collective genius of the Quebeccois people, to all those men and women of the common people who, by their courage, their ingenuity and their culture, made our country come to life and built it with the work of their hands.

We also believe that this prize is awarded to all the witnesses and musicians who, with all their being: their courage, their ingenuity, but rarely with adequate financing. They bring to our cinema the breath of warmth and life, a vital and essential contribution. We feel solidarity with these passionate image-makers who, without having received any real support from the institutions or the almighty industry, bear with their own arms the screen of their vision of the imaginary and the real.

We would like to thank the Canada Council whose support made the shooting of this film possible. We believe also that more than one film-funding organism could usefully gain inspiration from the flexibility and the open-mindedness that prevails in the Canada Council’s granting process.

The NFB’s English production also equally contribute in a crucial manner to the technical naking of the film through its assistance program to independent filmmakers, and we thank them while underlining the urgency of a similar program in French production.

We were also assisted by the Quebec government’s now-defunct Oise Arts program, by the CFDC (now Telefilm Canada), and by Radio-Quebec even though with the “other television” the discussions were long and laborious in order to keep the screening of the work to its original running time.

But it is difficult to thank the former Institut quebeccois du cinema whose financial support made the script development possible, twice refused to invest in this production, despite two versions of the screenplay and Marguerite Duparc’s collaboration. Not content with that, the Institut, in the name of a debatable principle, imposed upon us the repayment of its script development investment as of the first day’s shooting.
RICHARD BOUTET & PASCAL GELINAS

**La Turlute des années dures**

It is difficult to be sure of one’s attitudes in a decade like this. Can we heroize our men when we know them to be exploited? Can we romanticize our industrial scene when we know that our men work brutaly and starve ignorantly for it? Can we praise it—and in art there must be praise—when the most blatant fact of our time is the bankruptcy of our national management? Our confidence is sapped, our beliefs troubled, our eye for beauty is most plainly disturbed: and the more so in cinema than in any other art. For we have to build on the actual. Our capital comes from the actual. The medium itself insists on the actual. There we must build or be damned. —JOHN GRIELSON (1935)

Every year the Quebec Association of Film Critics awards the $5,000 Louis-Ernest Ouiet Molson prize to the best made-in-Quebec feature film released in the year preceding. This year the five finalists boiled down to a toss-up between Andre Forcier’s Au clair de la lune and Pascal Gelinas & Richard Bouhet’s documentary musical tragedy on the Great Depression then and now, La Turlute des années dures, with the prize going to the latter.

A curious choice indeed—and one that possibly says far more about the discontent in the critical milieu over the orientation taken by the officially funded filmmaking organisms. A wonderful occasion, to be sure, for Pascal Gelinas to say in public and on prime-time francophone television some important things that needed to be said. All in all, an opportunity for the revival of a long-standing political debate about film and filmmaking that has of late been sadly stifled beneath the cold, wet blanket of hard times.

If this rediscovery of a critical voice is all to the good, it leaves unaddressed one basic question—the raison d’etre for the prize itself—namely, the honoring of the best Quebecois film of the previous year. Was La Turlute des années dures really the best film of ’83?

The short— and blunt—answer is no. La Turlute is a competent documentary, a work of passion, dedication, and love, that was made under impossible conditions without any official support (except for the NFB as always under-the-table, aided reluctantly by Radio-Quebec). La Turlute is a filmic gesture of criticism, directed against the capitalist system as a whole, and more specifically against what one could call the capitalist method of filmmaking. And it is for this, one suspects, more than for any intrinsic filmic value that the film was awarded the Ouiet-Molson prize.

As a film, La Turlute accomplishes two important things: on the level of its archival footage, it rescues from oblivion, otherwise rarely seen Canadian images of the Depression. And this is a crucial act of memorialization for we are all too familiar with, say, American or even German images of the dirty ’30s. It is important to see what the 1929 Crash looked like in Canada: how the Montreal newspapers played the story, the consternation of Canadian stock traders, the closing of Canadian factories and so on. But once these images have been established, one can only conclude, with small comfort, that the Depression in Canada looked pretty much like it did anywhere else in urban settings where workers have been reduced to idleness by capitalist over-production. Only in rural Quebec did the Depression look different: here, the Church-sponsored colonization of Abitibi or the lumber camps of the Quebec forests, reveal the face of an exploitation that was not only pre-capitalist, but was brutally intensified by the collapse of the outside capitalist economy pressing down upon the ‘primary’ natural-resource economy.

That these reminders of their double exploitation—as Quebecois and as Canadians—would strike some powerful response in Quebecois today is hard to believe.

Secondly, on the level of sound, La Turlute accomplishes an equally important recuperation of the wordless type of folk music known as the “turlute”, a kind of musical humming. The film’s 25 songs are an archival feat of sound-recording, and a lively echo from an obliterated past. For these two reasons—image and sound—La Turlute can definitely lay claim to a fully deserved distinction as a film that has a necessity of its own. That necessity, however, does not necessarily make it the best.

For La Turlute makes the jump from the ’30s to the present in a manner that is both Billyely facile as to be questionable. Contemporary newspaper headlines and images of today’s unemployed are engaged and even the closing song with its message that “together we can change the world” updates the musical complaints of the ’30s; and thirdly, the various images of the film who lived through the ’30s opine today that everything is much the same. Capitalism produces unemployment, mass unemployment produces work camps, work camps produce the recruitment material for mass unemployment. Cut to Reagan, cut to missiles. Rousing song, End of film.
La turlute des années dures


La Turlute one of La Turlute’s unidentified witnesses reminisces about a life spent in the service of technology.

One of La Turlute’s unidentified witnesses reminisces about a life spent in the service of technology.

Spirited, combative, lively – La Turlute is all that, and in the same basic griersonian style of the ’30s that hasn’t budged an inch since. Is it this – that is, basically a throwback – that is being feted as the best film of 1983 (or better 1938)?

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20/Cinema Canada - May 1984