Richard Boulet & 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 brutally and starve ignobly 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 Grierson (1935)

Every year the Quebec Association of Film Critics awards the $5000 Louis-Ernest Ouilmet 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 Boulet'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 Ouilmet-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 memory 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 our double exploitation—as Quebecois and as Canadians—would strike some powerful response in Quebecois today is hardly surprising.

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 so fully facile as to be questionable. Contemporary newspaper headlines and images of today's unemployed establish part of a simplistic parallel; the closing contemporary song with its message that "together we can change the world" updates the musical complaints of the '30s; and thirdly, the various witnesses in 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 armies; capitalism, therefore, produces war. Cut to Reagan, cut to missiles. Rousing song: End of film.