Jean-Claude Labrecque’s
Les années de rêve

The remembrance of things past, wrote Proust, incarnates itself in hidden objects. The secret is to discover the right objects, so says Quebec director Jean-Claude Labrecque does discover that object, but at the sacrifice of most of the film itself.

For the object in question is neither the dreams of the title (the first two-thirds of the film), nor the revolt of the original working title (Les années de rêve et de révolte), nor even the documentary (visual and musical) reconstruction of the years between 1964-1970 that embody much of the film. Rather it is something much, much more intangible — and far more important — namely, the dawn of modern filmic fiction itself as the nightmarish artistic holdover of the documentary (Monique Mercure, Carmen Tremblay and Amulette Garneau). During one hilarious family get-together veteran actor Roger Lebel delivers a comic performance that is simply staggering. But the real focus of Les années de rêve has broadened from the stifling intimacy of Quebec City to metropolitan life in Montreal and from the family to the marriage between Louis and Claudette (Anne-Marie Provencher).

Much of Les années de rêve is a kind of medley of overlapping dreams, each one as vague as the next. There’s the dream of personal happiness of Louis and Claudette, little developed outside of sex. There’s Louis’ indistinct dream of never having bosses to work for, a dream which leads him into syndicalist dabblings. There are the dreams of the ‘60s, articulated musically by the soundtrack (The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Robert Charlebois), and the peace & love dreams mouthed by Louis’ pot-smoking American cousin John-John (John Wildman). And finally there are the various Quebec dreams of social justice and national independence as signified by the letters FLQ on a wall; RIN posters, and above all by De Gaulle’s 1967 “Vive le Québec libre” visit to Montreal as recorded in documentary form by Labrecque himself.

But one by one the dreams go bad. Claudette discovers child-rearing, housekeeping and feminism; the Vippees are bludgeoned by the Chicago pigs; De Gaulle is just an old man reliving the 1944 Liberation of France in a private delirium of memory; and Louis himself spirals downward into violent agitation in the taxi business and dynamite thefts for the kiddies of the FLQ. After the Cross kidnapping, Louis on the run telephones Claudette that he has hidden blasting caps in the house, as she is about to get rid of the package she is interrupted by a phone call and their son opens the package instead. The film literally explodes as Louis and Claudette rush their mangled boy to the hospital only to drive right into the Canadian army’s October 1970 invasion of Quebec.

Yet it is only in that final sequence that Les années de rêve truly achieves anything of the epic scope that the film calls for. And if that scene works so successfully, it is because Labrecque has made October ‘70 the purely imaginative decor for his characters. Otherwise the documentary inserts – De Gaulle, Chicago ’68, the Murray Hill garage riot – simply push the characters out of the film. This is strikingly evident in one scene where John-John and Louis are still drinking and smoking hours after De Gaulle’s speech from the balcony of Montreal City Hall. They are utterly alone, surrounded by the detritus of RIN placards; mere bit players on History’s empty stage. Contrary to their intention, the documentary passages reduce the characters instead of enhancing them or their story. They are merely consumed into the anonymous, a dissolution which, while it may be central to the documentary, is anathema to fiction. If Labrecque’s documentary eye reduces a De Gaulle to an almost senile old man or a lesser historical personnage like Montreal mayor Jean Drapeau to a bewildered figure rolling his eyes in De Gaulle’s ancient face, then the fate of minor, non-historical folk like Louis and Claudette is simply to be repressed into utter insignificance in the documentary’s crushing claim to represent reality.

If Les années de rêve is then an uneasy tapestry of clashing modes of representation, there are nonetheless glimmers of possible stories that would be worth pursuing separately. For instance, Labrecque could make a fascinating comment on the passing of the FLQ out of all his De Gaulle material. Or a feature film that would so totally concentrate on the theme of the would-be revolutionary in the hands of his informers, his corrupt political police, all of which are glimpsed in Les années de rêve but too scattered to achieve a powerful effect.

And yet both Les années de rêve’s one outstanding scene and at the same time the cause of the film’s overall undoing can be attributed to the film’s ambition. If the film simply tries to do too much, it does nevertheless manage to point a way out of the dilemma. Les années de rêve, somewhat like Quebec’s own discovery of its modernity in the early ’60s, breaks through its own heavy, filmic traditions, to the bright light of the contemporary fiction imagination. And surely a glimpse of that is sufficient cause for triumph.

Michael Dorland