by Jean-Claude Marineau

In 1952 Alfred Hitchcock shot a film in Quebec City. It was produced by Warner Bros. and was entitled I Confess. The film rather quickly got lost in a critical oblivion from which it emerged occasionally in the context of general discussions of Hitchcock's oeuvre. It's an interesting film but hardly a classic like Psycho, North by Northwest or The Birds.

And yet it's a film worth looking at from one very specific perspective: that of a Hollywood shoot abroad - in this case, Quebec - and whose subject entails a close relationship with the production context, namely Catholic Quebec of the 1950s. By following certain threads in the film that seemed interesting to me, I saw around I Confess the emergence of a pattern of relationships with the Quebecois milieu that appeared worth exploring further.

The title itself indicates an initial approach: dubbed La Loi du silence in French, the film tells the story of a priest (Montgomery Clift) who, under the secret of the confessional, cannot reveal his own sacerdotal confession to having murdered someone. Under suspicion of having committed the murder, the priest finds himself in an untenable position, caught between his sacred and civic duties.

The script of the film was based on Paul Anthelme's play, Un homme et son péché, written in 1902, and for which Hitchcock had purchased the adaptation rights.

Hitchcock was Catholic from Irish descent. Of his roots he recalled: " ours was a Catholic family, and in England, you see, this is in itself an eccentricity, I had a strict, religious upbringing..." I don't think I can be labeled a Catholic artist, but it may be that one's early upbringing influences a man's life and guides his impulses.

Be that as it may, Quebec was the location selected for the I Confess shoot. Let's look rapidly at the historical context that situates this choice. If we take as examples some of the Quebecois films shot here at the same time, the mere reading of the titles offers interesting indications of the kinds of themes then being treated - Un Homme et son péché (1948) / Le Cœur de village (1949) / La Petite Aurore, l'enfant martyr (1951) / L'Esprit du mal (1953). To be sure, I've selected these titles because they point in the direction I wish to underline: the key position of religious thematics in the Quebecois cinema of the time. It would not be true to say that films at the time only dealt with these themes, but the presence of such themes is important to bear in mind.

Quebec, at the beginning of the 1950s, was still a strong rural society. Maurice Duplessis was at the height of his reign, and of course the church held pride of place in the orientation of spiritual life. All these facts seem to justify the choice of Quebec as the location for I Confess. If one adds to this the fact that shooting in Canada offered economic advantages, that the city of Quebec was the source of an important religious iconography, and that furthermore French was spoken, as in Anthelme's play, converging these elements made it possible to shoot the film here. Furthermore, the Canadian Co-operation Project - an endeavor between the Majors and the Canadian government - had been in effect since 1948, allowing for reciprocal arrangements on the level of cinema.

The film got underway in the summer of 1952 as Le Soleil, the most important local daily, noted on page one: "His Worship mayor Lucien Borne was present this morning for the first takes of the film I Confess that Warner Bros. is producing in our city in the next few days under the direction of the famed Alfred Hitchcock."

One should now ask whether this shoot on Quebecois soil would bring the city something other than additional tourist prestige. Several questions come to mind: Did Warners employ local actors and technicians? If so, what part did they play? Reading the credits suggest a simple answer: a few Quebecois were hired, but in minor positions. Evidently, even on a foreign shoot like I Confess, Hollywood had all the protectionist measures that this implies.

Let's look at the actors first. All the Quebecois are in secondary roles. Olivia Legare plays the lawyer Vilette, the victim of the murder that takes place at the beginning of the film. She reappears several times throughout the film in flash-back sequences, but his role is only a pretext, allowing for the unravelling of the plot, rather than being a true actor's performance. Then there is Gilles Pelletier (see box) who plays the role of Father Benoit, a distracted young seminarian, more preoccupied with theological questions and his bicycle than with his murder victims. He appears in several brief scenes, nearly always accompanied by his bicycle; his role has an episodic comic function and that is what it was, part of the furni­ture in the presbytery where Father Michael, the priest at the center of the drama, lives. Charles Andre, another Quebecois actor, has a similar role, as a supernumery in the presbytery. Finally, there's the young Carmen Gingras who plays a little girl whom the inspectors interrogate as a witness to the murderer's flight on the night of the crime. She only appears in one scene. Thus all the local actors have minor roles, and furthermore speak only in English.

The principal roles are held by Holly­wood or foreign actors: Montgomery Clift in the key role of Father Michael, Anne Baxter as Ruth Grandfort, the woman with whom Father Michael had a liaison before becoming a priest and who is now married to the premier of Quebec, and Father Paul Grandfort, played by Roger Dann! And there's Karl Malden as police inspector Larue in charge of the investigation, and Otto Hasse as the successor of the true murderer.

Turn now to the technicians. I've only been able to trace two local particip­ants, the shoot's police consultant, inspector Oscar Tanguay, and Father Paul La Couline designated as the credits as technical consultant. I wondered what that title meant, and getting in touch with Father La Couline helped clear things.

He told me that he had been hired by Warner Bros. for six weeks, with the job of reading the script and removing from it all that risked not jibing with the reality of ecclesiastical functions in Quebec, or that simply risked shocking religious authorities. "I had absolute authority over the script," he explained. As a theologian, a doctor in theology, he had the last word on the script. One can draw two conclusions from this. Firstly, that Warner Bros. and Hitchcock took pains to authenticate the clerical reality of the central character with that of the times. And secondly, though perhaps more importantly, they wanted to avoid cuts in the film by the Censor Bureau.
In addition to his work on the script, Father La Couline acted as an observer on the major portion of the Quebec shoot. Here too he could intervene if he felt it necessary. He tells this anecdote about shooting the film's love scene at Saint-Tite-des-Caps. In his opinion, Montgomery Clift and Anne Baxter were kissing with too much ardour, so he intervened: "Father La Couline was not to have the priest reveal the confession to the police. It is likely that Hitchcock took the comment into account since, in the film, it is Father Michael who reveals the confession to the priest. In this, Hollywood remained true to its own protectionist tradition.

To conclude on the contributions of the Quebecois to the film, one has to admit that these were mainly in the category of service personnel rather than as significant elements in the production, the only possible exception being the work of Father La Couline, a priest. In this, Hollywood remained true to its own protectionist tradition.

Reaction to the film in Quebec: If the production did not lend itself to a strong Quebec participation, the Quebec film censorship, on the other hand, did leave its mark on the film. In an interview, Gilles Pelletier told me the following story:

"The film's opening occurred in full style. There was a reception at the Mount Royal hotel. Hitchcock had been so nice with us, everyone. He made a little speech saluting the participation of the French-Canadian actors, and singing me out in particular. He was charming. I was playing on stage that night, so Hitchcock spent a few minutes with me before the reception afterwards. When I arrived, he turned his back to me. I learned later that the film had been cut – massacred by the censorship the night of the premiere. And yet he had paid, precisely to avoid that (referring to Father La Couline's work on the screenplay). So after that, Quebec and the Quebecois for him... He was interviewed on CBC. He was asked what he thought of this censorship, and he took advantage of this occasion in order to show how ridiculous we were – and he had this memorable phrase, that I find very beautiful (here Pelletier imitates Hitchcock's tone and slow delivery): "All I can say is that there will be one version of I Confess for the province of Quebec, and another version for the rest of the world that will be cut to make a profit."

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Did you do a lot of work in film before playing the role of Father Benoit in I Confess? Gilles Pelletier: At the time I was doing mainly theatre and radio. I had begun in 1945. I had worked on several semi-documentaries, especially for Crawley Films, the Ottawa production company, shot generally in English. I did many voiceovers for them in French. I also acted in a film – one in Abitibi on the mines, another at Kitimat in B.C. on hydro-electric power. So I worked quite a bit for Crawley Films, especially for Crawley Films, and they paid me right away. He told me:

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Gilles Pelletier: Yes, that's right. Hitchcock had seen me in one of the films I did for Crawley, the one where I played a lumberjack. He had the film screened. I didn't know he'd seen it. When we met he looked at me and said: "Can you keep that cut?" So I said, yes, yes.

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