

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 emerges 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*.<sup>1</sup>

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 to 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 sacristan's 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, *Nos deux consciences*, written in 1902, and for which Hitchcock had purchased the adaptation rights.<sup>2</sup>

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 instincts."<sup>3</sup>

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 Curé de village* (1949); *La Petite Aurore, l'enfant martyre* (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 themes 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.<sup>4</sup>

Quebec, at the beginning of the '50s, was still a strongly 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

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# Hitchcock's Quebec shoot



the source of an important religious iconography (for its churches in particular) 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 entente between the Majors and the Canadian government – had been in effect since

1948, allowing for reciprocal arrangements on the level of cinema.<sup>5</sup>

So 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."<sup>6</sup>

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 positions did they hold? Reading the credits suggest a simple answer: a few Quebecois were hired, but in minor positions. Evidently, even on a foreign shoot, Hollywood is Hollywood, with all the protectionist measures that this implies.<sup>7</sup>

Let's look at the actors first. All the Quebecois are in secondary roles. Ovila Legare plays the lawyer Vilette, the victim of the murder that takes place at the beginning of the film. He reappears several times throughout the film in flash-back sequences, but his role is really 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 murder stories. He appears in several brief scenes, nearly always accompanied by his bicycle; his role has an episodic comic function and that is all. He is, as it were, 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 (Pierre Grandfort, played by Roger Dann)! And there's Karl Malden as police inspector Larue in charge of the investigation, and Otto Hasse as the sacristan and true murderer.

Turning 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 in the credits as "technical consultant." I wondered what that title meant, and getting in touch with Father La Couline helped clarify this.

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 aspects 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. So it was that a Quebecois priest, with a doctorate in theology, 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: "I had them begin the kiss again because it lasted too long. The second take was also too long. Finally Anne Baxter said to me: 'Father La Couline, if you could see how we kiss in Hollywood...' Well, the kiss wasn't cut!"

According to Father La Couline, in the original scenario the priest played by Clift goes to the police and reveals the murderer's confession so as to dispell the suspicions weighing upon him. The only important alteration Father La Couline ordered made 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 not Father Michael who reveals the truth, but Alma (Dolly Haas who plays the wife of the murderer).

To conclude on the contributions of the Québécois 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, Quebec 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, with everyone. He made a little speech saluting the participation of the French-Canadian actors, and singling me out in particular. He was charming. I was playing on-stage that night, so I didn't see the film. I went to 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 Québécois for him... He was interviewed on CBC. He was asked what he thought of this censorship business - the English took advantage of this somewhat 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 Québec, and another version for the rest of the world!" Hitchcock was proud and vain. That this had been done to him by some asshole from the Censor Board, you know... I mean, it was almost a U.S./Canada diplomatic incident!"

All things in proportion, Pelletier's account is replete with interesting information, and suggested a direction for further research. At the Bureau de surveillance du cinéma du Québec (formerly the Censor Bureau), available data confirms that cuts were made to the film. The Bureau made nine cuts before giving the film a visa on Feb. 6, 1953, six days before the premiere.

These cuts amount to 235 feet of film, or about 2 minutes 30 seconds' duration. I was unable to learn from the Bureau exactly what portions were cut.

Father La Couline, who saw the film on its release in 1953,<sup>9</sup> says that the cuts were made where Anne Baxter explicitly says she had loved Father Michael before his acceptance into the priesthood. He insists, however, that "essentially, the cuts took nothing from the film," and the probable reason for the censorship was to show the clergy of the time that the Censor Bureau had the interests of the Quebec church at heart. This is still a matter of interpretation, in part since we cannot compare the original print with the cut version, and secondly as this information comes primarily from the priest who worked on the screen-

play as a consultant for the Church.

To the best of my knowledge, no member of the clergy sat on the Censor Board at the time, though the notion of a convergence of views and interests between the two institutions seems generally accepted.

Finally, Father La Couline, who was present at the premiere, confirms Hitchcock's anger. "He was furious," adding that, in subsequent days, Hitchcock was to have met Quebec's Cardinal Roy and the meeting was cancelled as a result of the "incident." Father La Couline adds that Hitchcock's anger was not directed towards the Church, but towards those responsible for the cuts, namely the Censor Board. One can, of course, take a director's anger at cuts in his film any number of ways...

Film critics made no mention of the incident, at least not in published newspaper commentaries in the days after the premiere. The only distant reference to the incident is in the account published in *Le Soleil*, Feb. 13, 1953, on the morrow of the event: "Very laconically, Mr. Hitchcock limited himself to repeating his thanks and hoping that his hosts would not reproach him for having taken too many liberties with the geography of their city!"

It would be worthwhile to undertake a more systematic study of press-coverage of the phenomena of film censorship at the time. This would allow an eventual assessment of the degree of relationship between the powers of the press, the clergy and the government.

But what becomes particularly clear in the story surrounding this shoot is the weight of the Quebec Church at the time in cinematic matters. For it is perhaps the Church, in the last instance, that emerges as the main local intervenor in the film *I Confess*. As for the rest of the story, both Hitchcock and Warner Bros would keep it to themselves.

(Translated by Michael Dorland)

## Notes

1/ Hitchcock goes so far as to say in his interview by Truffaut that "We shouldn't have made the picture," in François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, Touchstone Books, New York, 1967, p. 151.

2/ "Louis Verneuil came along with this play, and I guess he must have done a good sales job, because I bought it!", *ibid.* p. 148.

3/ Hitchcock as quoted in Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1983, p. 13.

4/ For a detailed discussion of this period in Quebec cinema, see Christiane Tremblay-Daviault, *Un cinéma orphelin: Structures mentales et sociales du cinéma québécois (1942-1953)*, Québec/Amerique, Montreal, 1981, *passim*.

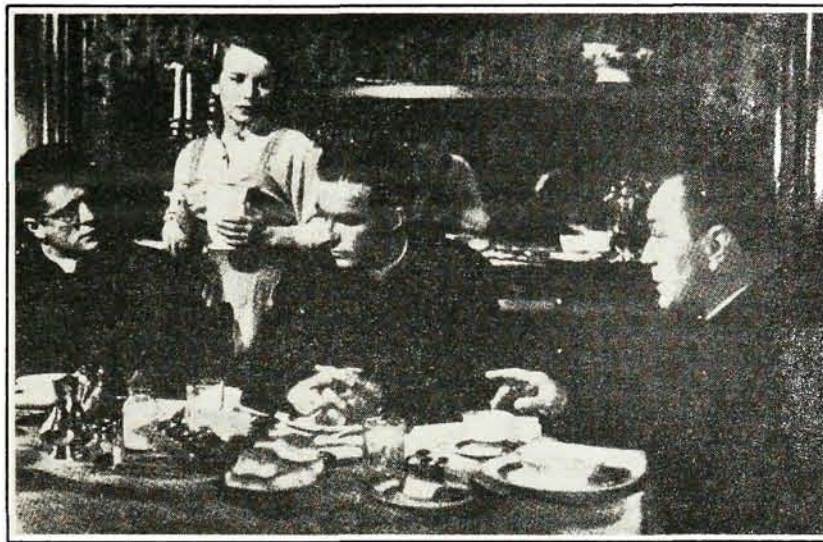
5/ The Canadian Co-operative Project "sera effectif environ dix ans. On fixe cinq objectifs a cette entente: 1) Obtenir plus de productions américaines au Canada. 2) Achat de plus de films canadiens sur le marché américain. 3) Donner une chance au capital canadien de participer aux productions américaines. 4) Promouvoir le tourisme américain vers le Canada. 5) Présentation d'informations générales au sujet du Canada dans des films présentés aux USA. Au total, on peut constater que le gouvernement canadien ne s'intéressa qu'aux objectifs 4 et 5." Yves Lever & Pierre Pageau, *Cinéma canadien et québécois, notes historiques*, Presses du Collège Ahuntsic, Montreal, 1977, p. 30. Also Maynard Collins, "Co-operation, Hollywood and Howe," *Cinema Canada* No. 56, June/July 1979, pp. 34-36.

6/ *Le Soleil*, Quebec, Aug. 21, 1952, front page.

7/ Another interesting aspect to explore would be the systems of distribution and exhibition of films in Quebec. The case of *I Confess* seems typical: the premiere in Quebec City was held at the Capitol Theatre, then part of the Famous Players chain dominated by American interests. Today, the Capitol is up for sale...

8/ The few words of French spoken in the film are mainly of the "bonjour" and "merci" variety. A brief sequence at the National Assembly reflects a similar interest: the exchange that is filmed takes place entirely in English.

9/ He had received special permission from the archdiocese to assist at the film's premiere. What makes this noteworthy is the fact that usually priests were not allowed to go to films, plays, etc., the reason being, according to Father La Couline, that it would reflect poorly on the Church that a priest had the means to pay for such entertainments when the poorest parishioners themselves could not.



● Gilles Pelletier, left, as Father Benoît in *I Confess*

## Gilles Pelletier

### Like a good horse

*Did you do a lot of work in film before playing the role of Father Benoît 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 voice-overs for them in French. I also acted in some films - one in Abitibi on the mines, another at Kitimat in B.C. on hydro-electric power. So I worked quite a bit for them, among other things in a film on lumberjacks that was a mixture of documentary and feature that employed actors.

*And how were you approached for I Confess?*

**Gilles Pelletier:** 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 that he'd seen it. When we met he looked at me (I had a brush-cut) and he said: "Can you keep that cut?" So I said, yes, yes.

*That's the haircut you have in the film...*

**Gilles Pelletier:** Yes, that's right. He then said: "Will you please wear this?" and gave me his glasses. So I put on the glasses. "Fine, fine. That's perfect, Mr. Pelletier." He looked at me, then he looked at Paul L'Anglais,\* then he began to laugh. I learned later, in Hollywood, that he'd screened

the lumberjack film because he wanted to work with (local) actors.

*So you went to Hollywood for the interiors?*

**Gilles Pelletier:** Yes, I was there three weeks and I worked four days. The rest of the time I was on stand-by. They weren't paying me much, so they could keep me on-hand. But everything was very organized. It was a 90-day shoot. At one point, they were half-a-day behind schedule. It was nearly a tragedy; people were saying, "We won't pick it up!" Those are money people, the studios. They treat you well, but it's like a good horse, you have to take care of it. They come to get you in a limousine at the airport, they pay you a little hotel-suite so you can stay easy. They treat you well, but don't be late in the morning or you'll hear about it!

I was paid by shooting day. When I got my pay I noticed they'd forgotten Saturday and Sunday. "Ah, we forgot Saturday," said the clerk. They tried, you see. For the Sunday work I didn't get paid right away. He told me, "You're not allowed to work on a Sunday, you're Catholic." But I had worked! Finally they did pay me for the Sunday.

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