

## Claude Jutra's *La Dame en couleurs*

The child is perhaps the most important single signifier in Quebec film, a cinema that Christiane Tremblay - Daviault has wisely described as 'orphaned.' For the child is nothing less than the spirit of cinema itself, the symbol of its ability (or failure) to go beyond appearances and return to the imaginary world of the celluloid womb. And certainly since *La Petite Aurore enfant martyre*, the fate of that cinematic child summarizes as nothing else can the true story of filmmaking in this country: its wretchedness and abandonment, but also its brightest moments of popular self-recognition (*Mon Oncle Antoine*, *Les Bons débaras*).

So it is appropriate that Claude Jutra's *La Dame en couleurs* crowns a rich filmic year for the orphans of Quebec cinema which, what with *Mario's* release at summer's end, *La Guerre des tuques* last fall, and now in the dead of winter Jutra's *Dame*, has in the last six months thrown up on the screen more cinematic waifs than in any previous cycle of production.

For these features suggest an ascending order for reaching the forbidden territory of the imaginary at the heart of the Québécois cinematographic project. As cinema, Melançon's *La Guerre* is the least successful (though the most successful at the box-office) because it refuses the imaginary project altogether. Beaudin's *Mario* confronts the imagination head-on, but crushed by realism, it is mute and can only escape reality through suicide. With Jutra, however, we do reach the promised land, the world of the child that is parallel to the kingdom of the imagination. It is a dark place of flickering lights, like cinema itself, of images projected upon flat surfaces, a place briefly accessible to certain categories of the mad (the artist), but where children can go anytime, though to linger there too long is not permitted.

The world of *La Dame en couleurs* is, fittingly, an insane asylum, where demented, howling patients, are abandoned to his/her private hell. It is a world administered by a repressive moral order, a world of nuns, that is, of desexualized ministering females surrounded by a distant cadre of scientific/technical (priests and doctors) male authorities, a world whose entrances and exits are monitored by armed guards. It is ostensibly the '40s; but it could be anytime.

Into this closed universe arrives a truckload of children, refugees from the emotional wars beyond, who are unloaded like potatoes into the hands of the overworked nuns in the already crowded asylum. The children either wander neglected through the wards, or are absorbed as surplus labour-power by the workings of the hospital, changing bedpans, washing patients, and otherwise being useful.

Amid the shrieks, howls and emotional misery, life for the children goes on: the oldest of the group, Agnès (Charlotte Laurier whose screen presence remains



● Claude Jutra's *La dame en couleurs*: a landmark in Quebec film literature

utterly stunning except when she cries), struggles with reading, writing and expressing her nascent sexuality to Sister Gertrude (Paule Baillargeon who just keeps getting better and better at conveying intensities of emotion with remarkable economy) who equally struggles with rejecting Agnès and keeping to the cold purity of the rule. Ti-Cul (the adorable Guillaume Lemay-Thivierge who soon rides again in *Le Matou*), youngest of the children, meanders through the asylum, getting to know the privately roomed patients, and exploring the building and grounds.

It is Ti-Cul who, while spying upon the asylum's artistic celebrity, the mad, epileptic, Van Gogh-like painter, Barbouilleux (Gilles Renaud), pries open the entrance to the underground passages beneath the hospital. Here the children - who also include Gisele, Sebastien, Régis, Ti-Loup, Denis and Françoise (Ariane Frédérique, François Méthé, Mario Spénard, Jean-François Lesage, Gregory Lussier and Lisette Dufour) - discover another world, one that they can make their own. It is a primitive, dark world of magic, of reversed symbols of the adults' rituals; a world that parodies the one outside as black magic parodies the practices of established religion; a world that is ultimately a caricature of the hideous larger universe.

Barbouilleux follows the children into their counter-world, marvelling at what they have found: tunnels of blank concrete walls on which he can inscribe his art. Here he can let his imagination soar, removed at last from his natural enemy, the sunlight, that illuminates all too clearly the poverty of his painting. At first the children are welcoming; they imitate his paintings but soon tire of the effort. It is Barbouilleux who paints the Lady of Colours of the film's title, a symbolic Ur-Mother for the orphans, a

goddess/idol for this underground kingdom.

The children, however, come to resent the adult intruder. Increasingly they want to spend more time exploring their new world full of mysteries (sex for instance in the case of Agnès and Denis). The delusion that theirs is a real world, as opposed to a parasitic caricature of the old, leads to acts of territorial aggression. The children fatally drug Barbouilleux. The shadow of that supreme mystery of adulthood, Death, is loosed upon their world.

Sebastien, one of the younger children, falls ill. Kept in the hospital infirmary, he rapidly dies. The children spirit his corpse into their world and attempt to resurrect him through storytelling. (Parallel to this primitive rite, the nuns perform one of their own: the burial of an empty coffin to cover up the inexplicable disappearance of Sébastien).

But the strange doings reach the ears of the Mother Superior who calls in the police. The hunt is on for a rational explanation, a rationality subtended by violence, fear and intimidation. The underground world is uncovered, with its art (Barbouilleux's and the children's drawings on the walls), its relics (the children's reverse crucifix, altar and stolen tapers) and, of course, the waxen body of the dead Sébastien. The archeology of this primitive culture unleashes a persecutory frenzy in the adults.

With police marksmen on the rooftops, tear-gas, bullhorns - in short, the full deployment of the technical might of the adult world - the children's world is destroyed and the children themselves are hunted down. Escaping through a tunnel onto the grounds, they make a run for the surrounding fence and the unknown freedom beyond. But Agnès, who has never known anything other than the institutionalized uni-

verse, falters at the prospect of a terrifying freedom, and surrenders to the authorities. In a parallel scene, Sister Gertrude, deciding that the love of a young girl matters more, sheds her habit and leaves the religious order in search of Agnès whom she believes has managed to escape.

*La Dame en couleurs* ends with a flashforward to the present. The adult Agnès has become one of the howling demented: she and Denis continue to live out their early adolescent love within the closure of permanent madness. The triumph of the institutionalized universe is thus total - over love, over life, and above all, over human time.

Such a brief synoptic account can only begin to suggest something of Jutra's achievement in *La Dame en couleurs*: its searing despair, its stark bleakness, the harshness of its denunciation of the world. *La Dame en couleurs* is all the more devastating in that it privileges nothing - neither art, nor the imagination, nor the children themselves who are beautiful but barbaric. In the world, Jutra seems to be saying, there is only pain and futility, only the hopeless human aspiration to attain a non-existent freedom, the fleeting belief in which is perhaps the last vestige of what remains of the authentically human in a totally administered setting. The irony, of course, is it is precisely Jutra's own successful manipulation of the cinematic institution that permits its denunciation: it is Jutra's very ability to capture the child-world that allows him to articulate the more general sense of total entrapment. But the critique of cinema via cinema is still cinema, and this paradox is perhaps the bitterest cut of all.

If *La Dame en couleurs'* greatest strength consists in being a demonstration by a master director of the courage it takes to advance further into the for-

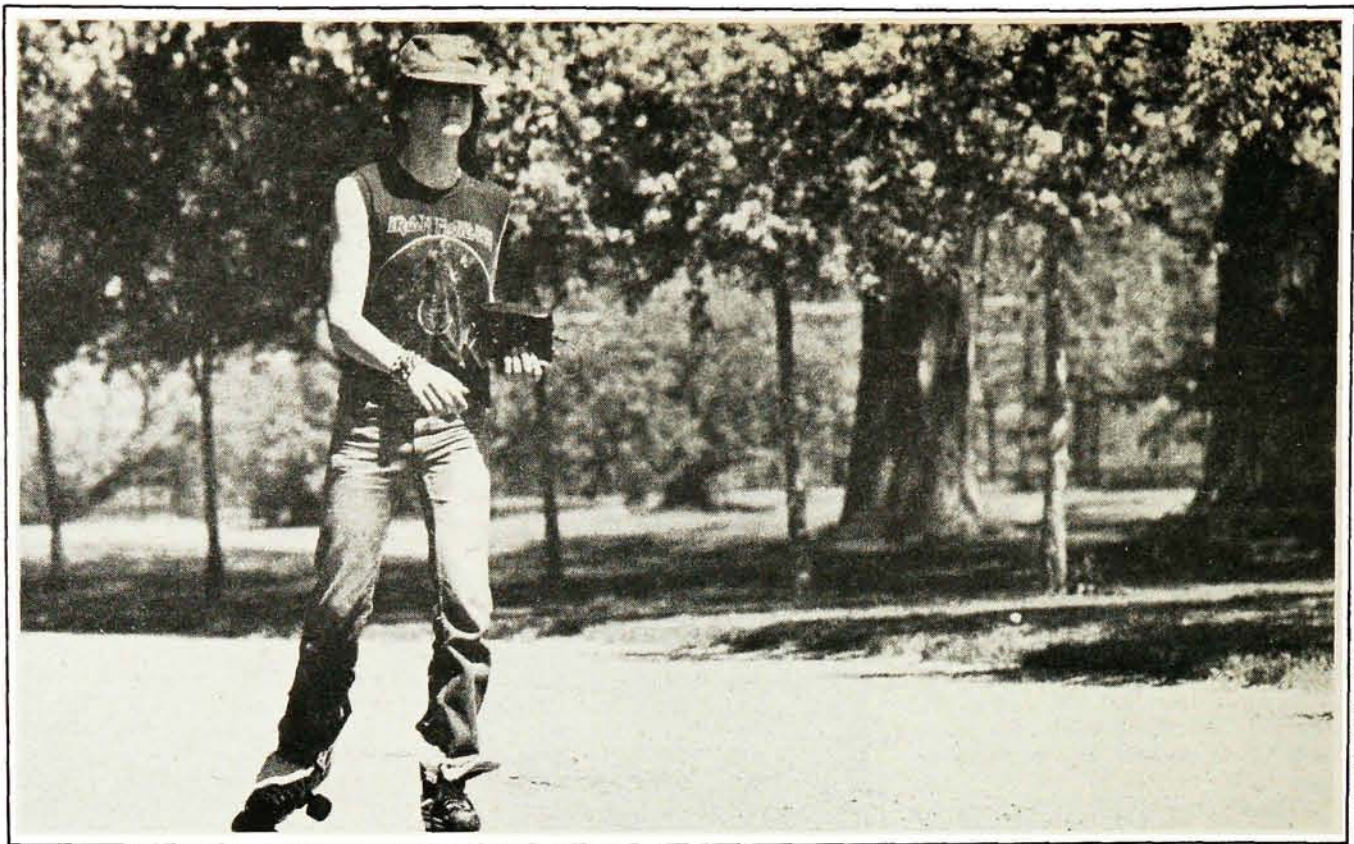
bidden imaginary than any other Quebec filmmaker, the nihilistic terrors of the past still press their nightmares upon that imaginary. Despite the fate of Agnès - who is not the first nor last cinematic orphan to succumb to the institution - Sister Gertrude's decision to strike out in search of the child remains the most hopeful, and least developed, aspect of a film that is not as utterly bleak as it might appear.

Part of the obscurity results from the fact that this version of *La Dame en couleurs* is edited down from a three-hour original. Without having seen the full version that Jutra shot, certain problems remain with the 119-minute edition: the development of the characters of the children is uneven; the Agnès-Gertrude relationship gets lost in the larger plot; Gisele Schmith's brief role as Mme Grégoire is too good for there not to be more of her than this one scene; Barbouilleux's ultimate fate is never known; it is not clear whether the fact that his paintings are simply awful is deliberate or not; a modern high-rise suddenly intrudes in the framing of a shot establishing the hospital grounds; and the lighting of many of the hospital interiors is so harsh that, again, it is not evident whether this is a deliberate contrast to the darkness of the underground scenes or a case of Film Board technical over-kill. These are weaknesses that cumulatively detract from a film which, otherwise, in its handling of three worlds (the institution, the imaginary, and the body) and its invisible direction of a splendid cast, is a landmark in Quebec film literature.

And as for our orphaned cinema, it can at least take some comfort in this: that in Claude Jutra it has found a man who is not afraid to reaffirm his deserved claim to paternity.

Michael Dorland ●

**LA DAME EN COULEURS** d. Claude Jutra p. Pierre Lamy exec. p. Pierre Lamy, Jean Dansereau p. man. Lorraine Duhamel sc. Louise Rinfret, Claude Jutra, based on an original idea by Rinfret d.o.p. Thomas Vamos ed. Claire Boyer sd. Richard Basse 1st a.d. Mireille Goulet 2nd a.d. Pierre Plante cont. Marie Théberge admin. Nicole Côté p. assts. Elisabeth Lamy, Frédérique Lefebvre p. sec. Ginette Couture loc. man. Estelle Lemieux, Jacques Laberge 1st asst. cam. Jacques Tougas 2nd asst. cam. Christiane Guernon chief elect. Roger Martin elect. Guy Cousineau, Jean-Marc Hébert, Jean-Paul Houle grips Yvon Boudrias, Jean-Pierre Lamarche set des. Violette Daneau, Vianney Gauthier props Denis Hamel, Daniel Huysmans make-up Micheline Foisy hair François-Michel Hébert cost. Nocolletta Massone dressers Francesca Chamberland, Caterina Chamberland stills Bertrand Morin asst. ed. Louis Dupire titles Guy Lamontagne lab. Office National du Film boom Esther Auger mixers Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll sd. ed. Louis Dupire, Michel Juliani mus. Mozart, Naumann, Reichardt, Rollig & Schulz, Bach, Bruno Offmann, Ulrich Koeh, The Moss Music Group, N.Y. Cdn. dist. Les Films René Malo, Int'l sales Les Films Transit, (514) 526-0839 p.c. Les Productions Pierre Lamy Ltee and The National Film Board of Canada, with financial participation of the Societe generale du Cinema, Telefilm Canada, Societe Radio-Canada and Famous Players Ltee. colour, 35mm running time 119 min. l.p. Guillaume Lemaire-Thivierge, Ariane Frederique, François Methe, Mario Spénard, Jean-François Lesage, Gregory Lussier, Lisette Dufour, Charlotte Laurier, Gilles Renaud, Paule Baillargeon, Rita Lafontaine, Ginette Boivin, Christine Olivier, Johanne Harrell, Murielle Dutil, Nicole Leblanc, Sylvie Heppel, Monique Mercure, with Gisele Schmith as madame Grégoire, Martin Guay, Rolland D'Amour, Eric Dubois, Zachary de Rious-Perra, Gilles Cloutier, Françoise Berd, Hubert Loiselle, Benoit Dagenais, François Thivierge, Arthur Prevost, Armand Laroche, Michel Rivard, Guy Martin, Claude Pare, Claude Desjardins, Armand Labelle, Patricia Nolin, Marcel Huard, Louise Lacoste, André Chamberland, Nettie Harris, Joseph Di Iorio, Danielle Lepine, Marie-Suzanne Brossoit, Solange Sauve, Sylvie Madore, Jean-Jacques Blanchet, Francis Damedy, Daniel Jolivet, Philippe Reynald Cauchon, Jose Ledoux, M. Belavrac.



● *L'Émotion dissonante*: a missed opportunity for iconoclastic filmmaking

## Fernand Bélanger's *L'Émotion dissonante*

Not long ago, *Rolling Stone* magazine, in a feature article which could be taken as a *mea culpa*, wondered at length why "the generation that smoked pot in the '60s, doesn't smoke it any more." Noting the declining prestige of the marijuana culture (particularly in contrast with the upward mobility of cocaine), the magazine wondered aloud whether marijuana's long association with some of the most creative cultural movements was now over.

Marijuana, it seems, causes disorganization in normal perceptual patterns, and slows normal motor response enough to produce a really good time. But while it used to be great fun to smoke dope and then sit in the back row of Sociology 101, or to cut classes and drift around campus stoned, the '60s generation now finds that delayed motor response in the business world can be fatal. When the v-p Finance calls to say he wants that report now, no success-oriented '80s individual can risk fouling things up by tugging on a joint in the executive washroom.

If the '60s generation no longer forms the heart of the pot culture, then who does? *Somebody* must be smoking loads of dope; government reports state that, by the early '80s, marijuana had become the fourth most important cash crop on the continent, after wheat, corn and soybeans.

The answer to this conundrum is at least partly answered by Fernand Bélanger's recent NFB work, *L'Émotion dissonante*. Bélanger's mélange of documentary and dramatization comes close to being anthropological, in seeking out the '80s pot culture in its natural habitat. Focussing on Quebec teen smokers, Bélanger shoots them at length on street corners and in parks, hanging out at heavy metal concerts and

video arcades, and demonstrates a seemingly endless fascination with black-leather jackets and studded jeans. There is more range to the pot culture than this, however; other alienated youths attend conventions that denounce social oppression and hold workshops on the decriminalization of pot. Still others stay at home and play the piano, muttering, as they open the door of their parents' fridge, about how hard-done-by they are.

We are far, then, from the marijuana allure of the past, when any free-association test would have found "marijuana" coming up frequently in association with jazz, poetry, smoky clubs and the avant-garde. In Bélanger's film, no budding Ginsbergs lend credence to pot's association with creativity. Only black-leather-jacketed kids sitting around - or standing around, in their active moments - looking zonked.

In the hands of another filmmaker, this kind of material could have led to some pretty iconoclastic thinking. By keeping the footage of a particularly torpid segment of Québécois teen culture, but scrapping the outmoded perceptions of the past, one could have argued vigorously that pot is now more tied to conformity than to rebellion, and that heavy use is a dead-end. The jean-jacketed kids being frisked by cops in *L'Émotion dissonante* are no martyrs, and their parents, who are filmed anxiously attending drug-information sessions, are not the simpletons they are portrayed as. Yet despite the possibilities for innovation, Bélanger editorializes in a '60s social-worker tone. It's not the kids who are at fault, argues an earnest youth counsellor, as he shuttles between a detention centre and police headquarters in Montreal; instead, it's society and its structures - violence, the family, unemployment - that are to blame.

The film's murky message is not made any clearer by the confusing cutting back-and-forth between a fictional account of a young man's poetic urges, and the documentary footage from streetcorner Montreal and high-school classrooms. The characters in *L'Émotion dissonante* are, moreover,

generally uninteresting. There is no one here who is particularly articulate (*au contraire!*), sympathetic or attractive.

Ultimately, Bélanger's film may have exactly the opposite effect from what was intended. Culturally, pot is moving downscale, and in highlighting what he does, the filmmaker makes it easier to agree with those who pan marijuana use. *Reefer Madness* overstated the case against pot, and has, rightly, become a satiric cult film. But by leaning too far toward indulgence and a generous interpretation of pot, Bélanger too misjudges the culture around marijuana use. He fails to deal critically with the lack of a rebellious element, and the fatal effect this has on '80s drug-users. This lack of critical perspective or imagination makes *L'Émotion dissonante* a much less valuable film than it could have been.

David Winch ●

**L'ÉMOTION DISSONANTE** d. Fernand Bélanger a.d. Louise Dugal, Yves Angrignon p. Jacques Vallee anim. Pierre Hébert asst. anim. Elaine Depins anim. cam. Michael Cleary d.o.p. François Beauchemin, with Jacques Leduc asst. cam. Michel Bissonette, Seraphin Bouchard, Serge Lafortune, Jacques Tougas sd. Yves Gendron, Diane Carrière, Esther Auger, Jacques Drouin asst. sd. Yvon Benoit, Pierre Blain sd. ed. Alain Sauvé mus. René Lussier, André Duchesne, Ludwig van Beethoven, Robert Lepage, Bernard Buisson, Francine Lévesque, Robert Amyot, Offenbach, Lucien Francoeur mixer Jean-Pierre Joutel lighting Denis Baril, Jean Courteau grips Michel Cholin, Jean Trudeau titles Serge Bouthillier poster Pierre Durand mus. rec. Louis Hone consultants Pierre Lamarche, Pierre-Paul Lachapelle, Rock Tremblay, Irene Poissant, Thérèse Robitaille, Jacques Delfosse, Jean Hénare unit coord. Claire Nadon admin. Jacqueline Rivest unit man. Louise Dugal, Laurence Paré l.p. Francine Lévesque, Stéphane Beaulieu, Suzanne Walsh, Germain Gagné, Serge Landry, Jacques Primeau, Manuel Beauchemin, Mario Branchini, François Baillargeon, Sylvain Fournier, José Gravel, Luc Leroux, Michèle Bertocetti, Josee Rivard, Daniel Bélanger, Eve Deziel, Gilles Lamoureux, Jean-François Meilleur, Pascale Desrochers, Françoise Deschênes, Raymonde Robitaille, Céline Legault, Real Pare, Frederic, Jeannine Archambault, Louise Nadeau, Louise Lavergne, Christian Cantin, Le Théâtre de la Fenêtre Ouverte, Claude Morin, Daniel Brisebois, Aliette St-Pierre, Marc Cunningham, Paula Barsetti, Gilles-Philippe Pelletier, Réjean Bourgault, Odile Pelletier, Alain Filion p.c./dist. National Film Board of Canada Col. 16mm and video running time: 81 minutes.