The vital hybrid:

On Quebec's documentary renaissance

by Tom Waugh

First Scene. thriller-style: A vampire-like creature in black is clawing at a desperate man, climbing on his back, pressing him down to the ground. "I'm afraid," he cries, "it's caressing me while it's stabbing me.

Second Scene. more melodrama than horror: a father prepares spaghetti for his 10-year-old son, preparing to break the news that he is leaving, abandoning town and family for good. The boy knows what's coming and the father knows he knows and both are relieved when it's over.

Two memorable scenes from Quebec cinema last year, but not from the spurt of narrative features, already much celebrated by press and public as the most exciting crop in years. Rather, the scenes are from two smart new documentaries that almost got lost in the shuffle.

Documentaries? Nightmare fantasies and kitchen theatrics from the heartland of direct cinema?

It's the mid-'80s, and, in case no one has noticed, the most promising new trend in documentary both here and elsewhere is the hybridization of traditional documentary forms with elements of dramatization and performance. In Quebec alone over the last few years, the list of films deepening documentary forms with elements of dramatization and performance.

Meanwhile, the group creates four dramatized re-enactments of individual members' experiences (including the seductive vampire episode mentioned above), one participant's image of his emotional suffering, building from months of workshop preparation. Together the scenes reflect on the stigma of madness, on relations with family and friends, and on the control function of drugs and psychiatry, on the sexual politics of expressing emotion ('A man doesn't cry... Women aren't supposed to be aggressive').

The usual documentary format might have let the participants endlessly discuss their own experiences, but dramatization gives them and us direct access to their experience of madness and psychiatric care, and thus greater opportunities to analyze and learn collectively from them. One participant, Louise, a single parent, says of her reconstructed family conflict that she can now express anger much more clearly at her entrapment, and indeed her eloquence is stunning. "Her" scene shows her arriving home for a protracted weekend from the hospital only to find that husband and family have removed her children from the scene. Science and prejudice conspire to perpetuate her dependency. She asks for her children -- the answer is 'Have you taken your pills?'

The dramatized scenes become a means for the self-expression of people whose mental health "experts" have always silenced. What is more, they are presented on transferred video and are thus set off sharply from the documentary framework. This contrast in visual and verbal language accentuates the relation of action and reflection, of madness and lucidity, of document and memory, present and past. The spell of stereotype, pity and voyeurism is thereby broken by the boundary between video and film. A fascinatingly self-reflective moment comes when director-operator and participants debate whether to continue shooting a particularly despondent moment at the risk of catering to the spectacle of madness. Cinematic structure thus becomes integrated within the process of re-living, re-feeling, evaluating and decision-making that was part of the weekend dynamic, and indeed part of any dynamic of individual or collective empowerment.

To speak of empowerment, however, is not to say that the film is utopian or falls into the Romantic cliche of poetic madness endemic to our culture. The participants are toughminded and know that their personal and group struggles will continue. One woman, Suzanne, persists in finding comfort in her alienation and medication -- "her cocoon" as she puts it. Another character, Raymond, is confronting the kind of setback throughout the film that they all know is always possible. In fact, the resolution of the film is so open that our dramatic expectations are left raw and unsatisfied: these two characters will continue their struggle beyond the scope of the weekend and the film. What is important is that the film and our response to it validates that effort on their terms.

Produced on a minuscule budget of only $15,000, Pas fou is a tight and polished package that only occasionally jars with the modest realism of its aspirations. I wonder whether the otherwise sensitive direct camera wasn't occasionally guilty of the voyeurist impulse that the film explicitly discards and repudiates at other points. I had this doubt especially in its relation to Raymond -- the camera sometimes spies on his "mad" antics from a distant high-angle perch, and even teeters back and forth whenever it watches him do the same.

Aside from this ambiguity, Pas fou is a provocative work of art that should be widely seen. To date, however, all has not gone well: after several weeks in Montreal art houses, promotion has been lacking in energy. Radio-Quebec, has unaccountably refused the film; and the reviews have had sympathy without splash (one viciously ignorant review in Sentence). Declared that we must now expect films by dwarfs called Not Little Like You Think or by ugly people called Not Ugly Like You Think -- a vivid demonstration of the oppression the participants angrily re-enacted. One hopes that the anticipated English version will reach the audience it deserves.

With Le Dernier glacier (The Last Glacier), the seams between documentary and fiction are such less visible. On one hand there is a document in many ways an epitaph for Schefferville, the northern Quebec mining town en-
t ponds in 1982 by the shutdown of Brian Mulroney’s iron Ore of Canada. In
taverns, classrooms, hockey rinks and
restaurants, people talk about the im-
pending disaster and get ready to leave.
Snow piles up on the roots of abandoned
houses, immobilized schoolbuses and
mining equipment create haunting, dead
landscapes. A gh5e future Prime
Minister tells a Parliamentary commis-
sion of the profit margin necessary to
keep a community alive. The area’s
native population proceeds as if nothing
had ever happened, though their lives
have been irretrievably affected by a
harmlessly tactful and are staying,
while the white kids are more voluble
and are getting ready to pack. At the
same time, the split screen doesn’t let
the intimacy of individual closeups
cloud our perspective. At other times
the split screen sets off the lucidity of
the present with eerie colour archival
footage from ’50s industrial films ex-
hibiting false hopes of an earlier
generation. A final scene depicts Raoul
on the train taking him away from the
commitments of 25 years of his life, the
the wheel has come full circle again
and next to films like Glacier and Pas
fou, films that still maintain the un-
broken gospel of the direct, like Hookers
or Davie, look conspicuously voyeur-
istic and complacent.

Another aspect of Glacier that brought
the ’60s back for me was the choice of
the working-class nuclear family as the
symbolic centre of the story. The archetyp-
ical natives and the equally archetypal
Glacier and like Pas fou comme on le
pense do. Let’s hope that the NFB can
now get behind the English version of
Glacier and give it the promotion it
merits.

In conclusion, the two films together
— one NFB and the other independent,
one costing thirty times more than the
other — present an encouraging picture of
the future of documentary film in Que-
bec. More encouraging, perhaps, than
what my filmmaker acquaintances tell me is justified.

A final point: how can the Academy of
Canadian Cinema justify the scandalous
omission from the Genie nominations
of these two exceptional films, next to
which the three honoured titles pale in
comparaison? I do not feel like repeating
the memory of the NFB’s longstanding
concern of the Academy’s oblivion towards
French-language Quebec films, which
is only the tip of the iceberg. The issue
also needs to be raised of the Academy’s
tendency to what is, after all, the most
important Canadian cinematic tradi-
tion: Documentary in French and En-
lish.

That a trickle of documentary crafts
people should be able to skew so com-
plex a world as the documentary profile in
this country with their exclusive
right of nomination and voting is
unacceptable. At the very least, five
members of the ensemble should be
required in such an exceptional year.
And surely it makes sense that the category
documentary be opened up to voting by
the entire membership and that the docu-
mentary contributors to be eligible for
other categories (Fortier’s editing was
nominated for the ordinary, Le Crime
d’Ovide Plouffe but not for the dazzling
work behind Glacier; and could not
Michel Rivard’s wonderful song about
the death of a town has been added to the
list of exceptional nominations nomi-
nates)?

And while we’re at it, working
kritics should be recognized as essential
links in the film industry chain and be
admitted to the proceedings. Perhaps
then, the present pseudo-bicultural
embarrassment could at last begin to
give way to a genuine structure for
honouring achievement.

Documentaries

Hierarchical ranking of white society’s boom-
and-bust.

Fiction enters the epiphany when
Leduc and Frappier create characters
to focus their archetypal Quebec story:
Raoul, an ex-miner turned taxi-driver;
his estranged wife, Carmen, a waitress;
and Benoit, their 10-year-old son.

The transition between dramatiza-
tion and non-fiction are much softer
than in Pas fou, or, for that matter, in
Albedo, Leduc’s previous project in
which the death of a community was
expressed through the problematic of
a simple life. In Glacier, skillful, lowkey pro-
fessional actors mingle on the screen
with the participants of the real-life
drama, whose homes, cars, and work-
gles are an extension of the larger
doomed landscape outside. Carmen, for
example, departs from her scripted
sciences to participate as onlooker in one
of the film’s key moments, a party for a
(real) fellow waitress celebrating her
25 years on the job by leaving, like Raoul,
for the south.

The concept of the illusion of reality
and the intervention of writer and actor
is inscribed primarily in Monique For-
tier’s editing, which, incidentally, is
breathtaking. Here, split screens and
frames-within-frames devices that
I’ve hardly seen since the ’60s — are used
to splendid effect. For example, dozens
of comments by the classmates of Be-
noit (a talented Schefferville amateur
chosen on location) are set up side-by-
side in pairs, their comments about the
events around them alternating in ca-
dence. The diversity of their perspectives
is very rich: the native kids are good

This is very rich: the native kids are good

Le Dernier glacier’s co-directors Roger Frappier and Jacques Leduc.

Le Dernier glacier’s lead Robert Gravel.