

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 with various kinds of performance and dramatization is already long and diverse (and, of course, uneven): *Journal Inachevé*; *Le Confort et l'indifférence*; *La Turlute des années dures*; *Marc-Aurèle Fortin*; *Beyrouth, a défaut d'être mort*; *The Masculine Mystique*; *Rencontre avec une femme remarquable*; *Laure Gaudreault*; the two new features on abortion, and so on. And from abroad one could mention such entries as *When The Mountains Tremble*, or *Daughter-Rite*. An interesting new tactic has thus been consolidated as an artistic consensus every bit as unanimous as was direct cinema in the '60s or archival compilation in the '70s. What is particularly exciting, then, about the two new films under review, *Pas fou comme on le pense* and *Le Dernier glacier*, is not

their trailblazing uniqueness, but their success in pushing the new hybrid trend toward unprecedented power.

Seen together, *Pas fou*, an independent production by my Concordia Film Studies colleague Jacqueline Levitin, and *Glacier*, an elegant National Film Board feature by veterans Jacques Leduc and Roger Frappier, are the best evidence that Quebec documentary – far from stagnating in the current funding crisis – is in amazingly good health.

Pas fou comme on le pense (*Not Crazy Like You Think*) was undertaken by Levitin in collaboration with a group of former psychiatric patients. The group had organized as Solidarité-Psychiatrie both to provide mutual support as an alternative to establishment psychiatry and to raise public awareness of its abuses. The film is first of all a document of the group's weekend session in a country setting. A traditional direct camera participates in their process as a group, passing from individual pain to collective healing, from conflicts to renewed communal strength.

Meanwhile, the group creates four dramatized re-enactments of individual members' experiences (including the seductive vampire episode mentioned above, the victim'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, 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 probational 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



● *Pas fou comme on le pense*'s director Levitin, center, with crew and cast

whom 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 accents the relationship 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 cliché 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 wondered whether the otherwise sensitive direct camera wasn't occasionally guilty of the voyeurist impulse that the film explicitly dissects 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 *Séquences* 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 ex-

Tom Waugh teaches film studies at Concordia University in Montreal.

tinguished in 1982 by the shutdown of Brian Mulroney's Iron Ore of Canada. In taverns, classrooms, hockey rinks and restaurants, people talk about the impending disaster and get ready to leave. Snow piles up on the roofs of abandoned houses, immobilized schoolbuses and mining equipment create haunting, dead landscapes. A glib future Prime Minister tells a Parliamentary commission of the profit margin necessary to keep a community alive. The area's native population proceed as if nothing had ever happened, though their lives have been irremediably affected by a

humouredly 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 expressing the 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 unbroken gospel of the direct, like *Hookers ... on Davie*, look conspicuously voyeuristic, and complacent.

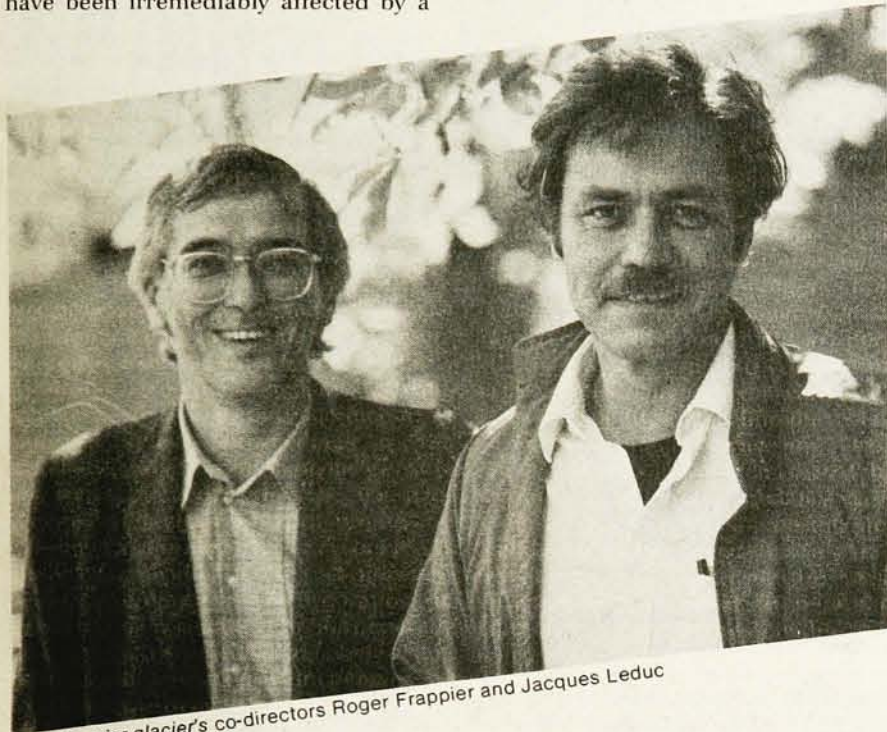
Another aspect of *Glacier* that brought the '60s back for me was the choice of the working-class nuclear family as the symbolic centre of the story. The archetypal natives and the equally archetypal

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 non-commercial cinematic horizon. 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 comparison? I do not need to repeat *Cinema Canada's* longstanding criticism of the Academy's obtuseness towards French-language Quebec films, which is only part of the problem. The issue also needs to be raised of the Academy's attitude to what is, after all, the most important Canadian cinematic tradition – documentary in French and English.

That a trickle of documentary "crafts" people should be able to skew so completely and arbitrarily the documentary profile in this country with their exclusive right of nomination and voting is unacceptable. At the very least, five nominations should have been required in such an exceptional year. And surely it makes sense that the category for best documentary be opened up to voting by the entire membership, and for documentary 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 have been added to the present abysmal list of song nominees?). And while we're at it, working critics 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.



● *Le Dernier glacier's* co-directors Roger Frappier and Jacques Leduc



● *Le Dernier glacier's* lead Robert Gravel

generation of white society's boom-and-bust.

Fiction enters the epitaph 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. With the closing of the mine, Raoul decides to leave for the south and the breakup of this family both reflects and embodies the larger economic and social disaster.

The transitions between dramatization 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 couple). In *Glacier*, skillful, lowkey professional actors mingle on the screen with the participants of the real-life drama, whose homes, cars, and workplaces are an extension of the larger, doomed landscape outside. Carmen, for example, departs from her scripted scenes 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 clash of the illusion of reality and the intervention of writer and actor is inscribed primarily in Monique Fortier'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 Benoit (a talented Schrefferville amateur chosen on location) are set up side-by-side in pairs, their comments about the events around them alternating in cadence. The diversity of their perspectives is very rich: the native kids are good-

frame of the train interior surrounded by the austere beautiful, unperturbed winterscape. Seeing such simple and effective use of these devices, I was amazed that more documentarists don't use them: is it the complacency of direct-cinema illusion that inhibits such experimentation, or the increasingly essential prospect of broadcast revenue with the attendant myth that frameline hanky-panky won't pass on the small screen?

Ultimately the effect is classic. I was reminded strangely of the '60s boom-years for Quebec cinema (as well as for resources industries). Then, screens were covered with semi-documentary films in which Genevieve Bujold (*Entre la mer et l'eau douce*) or Gilles Vigneault (*La Neige a fondu sur la Manicouagan*) or countless other archetypal Quebecois improvised their emblematic narratives against backgrounds that varied from the snow of a company town, the St. Lawrence, to Outremont or Montreal's East End. Then too the tone was essentially tragic, with little of Levitin's feisty imagery of people getting together to bounce back. Dramatization in the '60s was nevertheless a proven means for a documentary film tradition to deepen its understanding of the individual dimensions of nationhood and modernization, and *Les Ordres* was in many ways the culminating point of the experiment.

But of course the direct cineastes of the '60s were hardly the first to experiment with this approach: the '30s also were full of documentarists trying to "personalize" the form (long before the advent of the direct-cinema illusion), calling for hybrid forms and creating sharply defined dramatic characters to embody the struggles of the Depression and the War. Think of *Spanish Earth* or *Native Land* or *Fires Were Started*. Now

mother and son stay on to maintain their roots in the North, while the ex-miner/ex-father Raoul takes the tragedy on his defeated patriarchal shoulders and catches the last train south. It is a vision that seems faintly pre-feminist, almost nostalgic for the days before natives, women, and other "marginals" began clamouring for space on Quebec screens in the '70s. I feel uneasy with the breakup of the traditional family being equated, however sympathetically and poetically, with the harsh economic crisis of the '80s. I've heard it before – most recently, it seems to me, from Ronald Reagan.

As for the natives themselves, there are good moments when traditional ways of life are glimpsed, when native children are given the chance to speak, or when a Montagnaise non-professional actress, Marie St-Onge, steals her scene with understated panache from her Montreal-trained co-star. Otherwise, though, the natives are in the background this time, leaving Arthur Lamothe the still unrivalled interpreter of native realities of the region. All the same, it is good that the Quebec public is at least kept in touch cinematically with the original inhabitants of a land we otherwise keep exploiting and abandoning, doing.

Glacier's budget was \$500,000, and it shows: its view of the environment and the people implicated in the tragedy is nothing short of lavish. It may be that epitaphs should not be gorgeous, but I would certainly defend this one. The NFB may be bureaucratic, timid and wasteful, but *Glacier* is the best argument for preserving the creature I've seen in years – in fact, for tripling the NFB's budget. After all, isn't this precisely one of the things our state cultural apparatus should be doing, charting our social geography with a generosity that the *Plouffe*-peddlers could never manage? And that's exactly what films like

LE DERNIER GLACIER d. Jacques Leduc & Roger Frappier sc. Frappier, Leduc cam. Leduc, Pierre Letarte cam. assts. Rene Daigle, Jacques Tougas sd. Claude Beaugrand lighting Robert Lapierre, Roger Martin ed. Monique Fortier asst. ed. Anne Whiteside sd. ed. Claude Beaugrand orig. mus. Rene Lussier, Jean Derome mus. mix. Louis Hone mix. Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll opt. efx. Jimmy Chin, Susan Gourley 2nd unit Seraphin Bouchard, Yves Gendron tech. coord. Edouard Davidovici unit admin. Nicole Cote. Gaëtan Martel, Evelyn Regimbald p. Jean Dansereau p.c. & dist. National Film Board of Canada Col. 16mm, 35mm running time: 83 mins., 45 sec. Lp. Robert Gravel, Louise Laprade, Martin Dumont, Michel Rivard, Marie Saint-Onge, Renato Battisti, Gerard Berube, Ernest Lord, Real Ouellet, Lewis Scherrer, Juido Senerchia, and the members of the Syndicat des Métallurgistes; Jacques Gauthier, Joseph Jean Pierre, Annie Jean Pierre, Mathieu Andre, Luc Andre, Janine Gauthier, Philippe McKenzie, and the Matimekosh Montagnais band council; Jocelyne Lemay, Remi Scherrer, Steven Menard Danny, Michel Castilloux, Denis Gagnon and native-born Schreffervillians; Paul Wilkinson, Russel Blinco, Armand Ferguson, Janine Fournier, the personnel of the Renaissance Restaurant, the children of Notre-Dame School, and the taxi-drivers of Schrefferville.

PAS FOU COMME ON LE PENSE d./p. Jacqueline Levitin cam. Serge Giguere sd. Pierre Blain ed. Levitin, Herve Kerlann p.c. Soleil Films, with the participation of Solidarite-Psychiatrie dist. Cinema Libre (514) 526-0473 Col. 16mm running time: 75 min.