Denyse Benoit's
Le Dernier havre

Le Dernier havre (The Last Harbor) is a film scripted and directed by Denyse Benoit from a novel by Yves Thériault. One of the great names of Québécois literature, both popular and critically successful, Yves Thériault is a man with little education. He is known for his stories of the common man, and his novels, which deal with the woodsman, fishermen, and farmers of French-Canadian origin, as well as the Indians and Eskimos.

His two best known works, Agaguk and Ashini have as their principal character an Eskimo and an Indian and their pride and their innocent way of life) a symbol for the French-Canadian origin, as well as the hope and aspirations of minority cultures as a concern which has changed, the whole atmosphere of the ocean. None of these themes of his novels in the plays and the film is fairly faithful to the events of the novel but somehow misses the essential meaning of the book. Most of Denyse Benoit's previous work has been in the theatre (she has made only one other film) and the main focus of the film is on the personality of the well-known Québécois actor, Paul Hébert, who plays the old fisherman. He has received much praise from the French critics for his wonderfully appealing performance. Indeed he does portray the old fisherman as an appealingly whimsical, cordial old man who has a mystical relationship to the sea.

I suppose it is always a mistake to read the book first but this certainly didn't fit the image I had formed of a cankerous and willfully independent old man whose views of the society around him were closer to contempt than to benign amusement. But it is not only the character of the old man which has changed, the whole atmosphere of the story has become much sunnier and more optimistic than that of the book. This is, after all, a book which ends in a suicide. For the old man eventually despairing of his days is spent trying old (although Paul Hébert only looks about 65), and his mystical, poetic love of the ocean. Something seems to be missing. There is a strength in the novel, a darkness of vision which is totally absent from the film.

It is true that the old man in the novel loves the ocean but it is not a purely poetic love. It is also a love for an independent way of life. One where a man's skill, strength and luck was needed to wrest a living, and to stay alive in his small boat on a not always benign sea. It is an independence which has vanished with the coming of a modern, industrial society. The old man is sickened by this loss of independence, not only for himself, but for the whole community. It is very like the suicide of the Indian chief in Ashini – an act of protest, a last willful act of independence. At the end of Ashini, the chief goes to the Happy Hunting Grounds and is in high favour with the great Manitou for his heroic battle he has fought for his people, a battle to give them back their pride and their independence. It is a battle without hope but a courageous one and his last act in this battle is a suicide which, I believe, is very like the suicide of the old fisherman. It is true that translating a work of literature into a popular medium does tend to change the ideology of the text to a more acceptable fit with the tenets of society. Thériault himself wrote many radio plays and his recurrent themes of man's relationship to nature and the forces of the universe, the recurrent theme of man's relationship to nature and the forces of the universe, the recurrent theme of man's relationship to nature and the forces of the universe.

The optimistic tone of the film is interesting in terms of what appears to be a general optimism of Canadian society, of recent films (such as Le Matou) have taken a more positive stand towards Quebec's society and the opportunities it offers the individual. I think this optimism is symptomatic of the kind of work which Le Dernier havre reflects, but it is a climate ill-suited for a faithful rendition of Yves Thériault's vision.

Mary Alemany-Galway

LE DERNIER HAVRE
d. Denyse Benoit
in collaboration w. g. Marc Daigle