Jean-Daniel Lafond’s
Les Traces du rêve

The screen is white with snow. Soon a heavy figure emerges from the white space. The camera zooms in on a man who fills the frame. The man is one of Quebec’s leading film-makers, Pierre Perrault, who this time does not hold a camera. Perrault plods through the woods imposing himself as the master. It is not by mere chance that the director, Jean-Daniel Lafond, lets us hear his subject; voice first. Perrault’s poetic narration invites us to share his dream of giving back Quebec’s tradition to real people in real places. It is a dream which Les Traces du rêve captures.

In the style of Perrault, who gives the Quebecois perspective to speak out, Lafond traces Perrault’s persona through the years. The spoken word dominates the images in Les Traces du rêve as in Perrault’s own work. Jean-Daniel Lafond translates his own idea of what Pierre Perrault is all about — the filmmaker, the poet, the nationalist. Perrault is filmed with critics, philosophers, writers, poets, musicians, actors in Perrault’s films, and Perrault’s reactions in Perrault, reactions which contribute to the tracing of his own portrait.

Twenty years separate Pour la suite du monde (1963) from La Bête lumineuse (1983). Throughout his work, the theme of men (not women) in communion with nature remains constant. Les Traces du rêve celebrates Perrault’s ideas. Lafond presents the filmmaker in tune with the environment, whether it be the woods or the Saint-Lawrence River. Lafond finds pleasure in contrasting the hunter’s bonds with nature to the jungle of sun-bleached Cannes where La Bête lumineuse (1983) is premiered. Lafond compares the flash of the names of Lefebvre, Godard, and Carle one after the other. Perrault’s name is not in lights. Perrault explains that he has nothing to do with Cannes (‘Je sais que j’ne crie pas...’). Where the audience dwindles from an attendance of 2,000 to 500 people as La Bête lumineuse unfolds, the pretentious talk of the French radio commentator underlines the hypocrisy of the whole rattrace of Cannes.

Lafond moves Perrault back and forth from the social uproar of Cannes to his cabin back home with his friends. Through the clips of Pour la suite du monde and La Bête lumineuse, he provides Perrault back his vital space. Conscious of the importance of words in Perrault’s films, the director chooses to show some of the subtitled clips from La Bête lumineuse’s original version.

Lafond describes how Perrault does not translate the Quebecois language into international French, but gives us the exact words spoken by the men. The subtitles heighten the linguistic differences between France and Quebec.

In Les Traces du rêve, Lafond films Stephane-Albert and Maurice the crosses of La Bête lumineuse — together with their former director and friend. Lafond hunts the hunter, filming Perrault as his main character. Yet, true to his nature as organizer, Perrault still remains in control. Les Traces du rêve revolves around the path which Perrault decides to follow. Inside the cabin situates the film at the 1970s. Lafond’s cinematic technique goes to the extent of adopting Perrault’s own visual style of cinema direct.

From Cannes to the woods, we are then taken on a ferryboat to Île-aux-Coudres. The philosophic Michel Serres, and the poetical Michel Garneau are also part of the voyage. Lafond discovers the past in Perrault’s films, and compares it to the present of Île-aux-Coudres. Focusing on Pierre Perrault’s trilogy where Île-aux-Coudres is the theater, Lafond avoids Perrault’s more personal touches. Lafond uses Léopold Tremblay (one of the men portrayed in Perrault’s trilogy) as a link between the ‘60s and the present.

Things haven’t changed profoundly on the island which is still haunted by an island apparition. Soon, horseback appear dressed all in white. Lafond reveals an increasingly clearer portrait of Pierre Perrault, cutting back and forth from the men’s conversation with Léopold Tremblay to Perrault’s earlier films. Les Voitures d’eau (1969). Le Regne du jour (1969). C’était un Québecois en Bretagne, Madame. (1977) and Un Pays sans bon sens (1969). Perrault’s major film, Pour la suite du monde, appears constantly at different intervals in the film. The filmmaker’s career is rooted in his love for people like Grand Louis, Alexis and Marie Tremblay. Perrault wants to make his films live vehicles for the Quebecois, teaching them about themselves and giving them the will to preserve their heritage without reconstituting it as a folkloric commodity.

Lafond follows in Perrault’s footsteps, hinting at Quebec’s nationalist movement. Michel Serres’ vivid oral expression together with Perrault’s living documents voice the fundamental similarities and differences between Perrault and the Québecois. Lafond’s voice longing for the idealized opening of Perrault’s own portrait.

André Mélançon’s
Bach et Bottine

André Mélançon’s Bach et Bottine begins with a dream. On the soundtrack, the voice of a little girl tells us that her name is Fanny and that she has lost her parents but that she is less sad at night. On the screen we get a long-shot of a wide field of snow populated only by the shadow figure of a little girl dressed in red. Out of the distance, a man and a woman on horseback appear dressed all in white. Magically one of the horses turns into a piano which the woman plays as the man dances with the little girl. A silent fairy tale world is created but the magic is abruptly broken by a close-up of the woman as she wakes up from her dream.

Through her conversation with her grandmother, we learn that the child’s parents are dead and that now that the grandmother is sick, Fanny will have to go and live with Jean-Claude, who is a digital refers to her “uncle.” Thus, in the first 10 minutes, the basic situation of the film is set up — an orphan child and the possibility of a “family.” The next scene shows us Jean-Claude at an office party where children and their antics seem to rule the roost as a young, aspiring bachelor, unable to relate to them and is only concerned with his music and being able to devote himself to it during the coming year.

What is a children’s film? How would one define it and what is its purpose? The obvious examples are the Walt Disney films which have dominated our screens. But children’s films are made all over the world and, in the socialist countries, special attention is paid to their production and distribution. Like any form of entertainment, they can also have educational value, aiding children in their psychological development and helping them to cope with the world. Bruno Bettelheim, the renowned American psychologist, associated this role to children’s films. Films are also a mass medium and, as such, are vehicles for the values and ideologies particular to their culture. Unfortunately, in Quebec and Canada, there has not been much support for children’s films. Except for Rock Demers’ Tales For All series, for which Bach et Bottine is the third of seven projected films, the previous two were André Mélançon’s La Guerre des tuques and Michael Rubbo’s The Peanut Butter Solution, much of the work in this area has been done specifically for television.

It seems to me that one of the crucial ingredients of a children’s film is seeing the world from a child’s point of view — children make little distinction between the two. It is the world of the imagination. This is immediately evident in Bach et Bottine. Fanny is quickly defined by her interactions with her grandmother and her environment. It seems as though she resembles the heroine of the Swedish books and films.
Pippi Longstockings: she is unconventional, straightforward, independent and has numerous odd animals as pets, in particular the Bottine of the title who is a skunk. As befits this age of feminism and the concern with the image of woman projected by the mass media, this depiction is not unexpected (even Hollywood can give us Sigourney Weaver as a macho heroine in Aliens) but it is welcome.

Pippi was a pirate's daughter and her world was one of adventure and fantasy where anything and everything was possible. And however, is thrown from the idyllic, almost 19th century setting of her grandmother's house in the country into the contemporary reality of a city environment: a place where the Québécois traditionally, in books and films, come to grips with the problems of a modern industrial society. For the child this is often a world of broken homes. Face where, as in Susanna Guay's Les Enfants aux petites valises, the short which preceded the film, children are trundled from one parent's house to another carrying their most precious possessions in a suitcase just as Fanny carries Bottine.

One of the virtues of the film is its specific social and physical context. This is especially important for the children of Quebec, since seeing one's reality on the screen does confirm and validate it. Most of the film is set in an older section of Quebec city, a typical Quebecois neighbourhood made up of flats with steep staircases going down to snow-filled streets. But the action takes place mostly within Jean-Claude's flat which Fanny gradually takes over as she brings in her animals and her Corey Hart poster.

The interaction between the world of the adult and that of the child is at the core of the film and provides its most comic and touching moments. There are some wonderfully humorous scenes such as the one where Fanny and her friends blow bubbles over Jean-Claude's head as he reclines on his couch transported into the music he is listening to. And part of the appeal of the film lies in its use of music, the classical music of Jean-Claude's world and the rock music of Fanny's world. Of course for the children the proliferation of animals which she manages to acquire and the antics of her pet skunk are a delight in themselves. But it is in the working out of the problematic child-adult relationship that the film is probably most worthy of praise. The frictions, frustrations and joys of such a relationship ring true in the film. And this is helped considerably by the completely natural and spontaneous expression of feeling in Fanny and the other child actors.

Yet, in spite of all this, I left the theatre feeling somewhat let down. I asked my five-year-old nephew, who I had taken with me, if he had liked the film. He answered, "yes," "Did you think it was funny?" "No," "Did you think it was sad?" "No, it was silly." I gathered from this conversation that it is not the type of film a five-year-old boy can identify with. There is a sentimentality, a focus on the emotions which I doubt would appeal to that age group, especially on such a realistic level.

The mixture of comedy and pathos is a very familiar style, one which we constantly see on television and indeed, the film is sponsored by Radio-Canada and First Choice Television. The focus on the home as the space where family conflicts can be dramatized, the emphasis on close-ups and on the emotions and interactions of the family members are all features of the family situation comedies made popular by American TV. This format goes back to the '50s with the popularity of Life with Father and has been updated in the '80s to include black families and single-parent families.

The film can easily be placed within this genre. And it shares the problems inherent in it. In the happy ending, the reunification of the family around Fanny, even if it is with a different set of parents, is too easy a solution. It is of course this sense of completeness, of the happy ending, which makes the genre popular. The fantasy and wish-fulfillment of the film is evident at the outset when a dream brings the dead parents back to the child. It is a dream which many children from broken homes must share. But one wonders how healthy it is for them to be encouraged in believing that this dream can come true.

Mary Alemany-Galway

Bach et Bottine


Paul Jay's

The Birth of Language

This 55-minute documentary is one of the more curious works I have encountered. In trying to understand and articulate just why I did not enjoy this film, I discovered first with the fact of my own anticipations in advance of the screening. Having a few years ago been very favorably impressed with another documentary by filmmaker Paul Jay called Here's to the Cowboy, I know that I brought high expectations to this latest work: expectations that it would encorporate many of the qualities I admired in the earlier film - engaging involvement with the way of life being explored, a very down-to-earth and unpretentious tone, risky and exciting camerawork and editing, a kind of nicely gritty, honest style of filmmaking that seemed full of energy and quite refreshing. This style was perfectly suited to the cowboy world being celebrated in the earlier work and perhaps it is unfair to have anticipated that such qualities would carry over into a different subject for a film. And yet, the switch from local phenomenon to international idea, from exploration of a way of life to exploration of a concept, has somehow scuttled the very qualities that made the earlier work so promising and I can't help but say that whereas Here's to the Cowboy was unique precisely because of its localism and down-to-earth energies, The Birth of Language is lacking in distinction because of its internationalism, the 'great theme' approach to documentary so familiar in series like The Ascent of Man. This is not to suggest that a filmmaker's work may not span human experiences both local, local and international ideas. The point here is that the switch in this filmmaker's focus has not served him well.

The Birth of Language is a somewhat lifeless, unenergetic film, often pretentious in tone, humourless, but aspiring to more than it delivers. Unfortunately, the film says very little of interest in its own right, at the same time that it seems imbued with high purpose and nobility of theme. The Birth of Language marshall an impressive battery of anthropologists as spokespersons, but manages to be simplistic rather than insightful, plodding and 'academic' in the worst sense of the word rather than challenging or truly informative. We essentially, that human language is different from animal communication, that humans speak many different languages and learn them from infancy, that apes, try as they might, under laboratory conditions, simply cannot master human speech, that the development of spoken language must have coincided with the development of conceptual thinking. All this is fine and wonderful, but turning the first documentary into a simplistic homage to the fact that this 'momentous turning point' in human development occurred at all. Even this awe would be acceptable in all its simplistic delivery were it not accompanied by a strange subtext running beneath its overt content.

Throughout the film, the voice-over narration is oddly insistant on the point that human language be seen as a 're