Jean and Serge Gagné's
La Couleur
Encerclée

If one sees surrealism not only as a modern art form but also as a state of mind which looks to overthrow conventional structures, then surrealism has long been a tradition among the artists and writers of Quebec. It was only after the Second World War, however, that their continual denial of the established order crystallized in the form of the 1948 manifesto Réfus Global (total rejection). Initiated by the Quebec painter Paul-Émile Borduas, one of the first of Canada's abstract expressionists, the document called for a "new civilization... which refused to be founded exclusively on those tools of reason, logic and intention." Its emphasis lay in the realm of "magic and freedom."

Borduas was fired from his teaching job for his pains and became an exile from his homeland. But this challenge to Duplessis' repressive society became, by the '60s, a mythic event. Serge and Jean Gagné in La Couleur encerclée attempt to carry on this tradition.

The title of this film could be translated as the encircling of colour, if colour is seen as an expressive, emotive force being encircled, imprisoned or hemmed in by the forces of repression. The film, in essence, is a barrage of images (live and animated) and sounds with a repetitive theme and whose only coherence really comes from that repetition. The theme is an old one; the conflict between artistic, imaginative freedom and the restrictive forces of society.

Two main characters represent the forces of freedom (a painter), and oppression (a businessman who is involved in the art world as a publisher and art dealer). "The business of art is organized thieving," Van Gogh is quoted as saying, and throughout the film he is used as a symbol for the fate of the artist who rebelled. The film is a collage of paintings and animators' works that have become a part of the creative process. The film does neither.

It focuses only on the plight of the artist within that society, La Couleur turns the cry of anger into a whine of protest. Improvisation and spontaneity were the credo of abstract expressionist painters who, in Quebec, were called the automatistes because their painting method was related to that of automatic writing in surrealism. In La Couleur encerclée, it's not only the surrealist vignettes which recall that art movement but also the expressionist frenzy of quick-paced editing and hand-held camera movements.

In some ways the film, rather than being a work of fiction, as it is labeled in the advertisements, is more like a documentary or a docu-drama. It does offer its audience a fascinating glimpse of a certain side of Quebec culture, that of the French-speaking artistic milieu, but perhaps only of the older generation of long-haired '60s rebels. I could recognize a few; Vaillancourt leading an artists' protest, Le Baiser Ravi (Patrick Straram) going on about poetry and art. The film certainly tries to be a document of its time and, like the Réfus Global, it would like to strike a blow against what it sees as a repressive social order. Unfortunately the artists' anger is not very convincing because we do not get clear image of the society which oppresses them. There is the absurd businessman, but he's too much a figure of fun to seem very oppressive. There's the recurrent image of the concrete spans of an autoroute blocking our way, but they have a certain abstract beauty. Paradoxically it is the images fabricated by computer animation which are closer to the cold technological side of modern society which these artists seem to be rebelling against.

If the Réfus Global was the first blow dealt for the Quiet Revolution then this film might be its death knell. Borduas not only wrote the Réfus Global, he also created great paintings which broke the established rules of seeing and created a new language of art. This film does neither. It is derivative and self-conscious where it should be original and freely expressive. The evocation of great artists' names and works does not guarantee a film of the same quality.

Mary-Alemany Galway

LA COULEUR ENCERCLEE

directed by Jean Gagné, Serge Gagné
produced by Martin Leclerc
written by Marcel Fraser
music by Jacques Rainville, Frédérique Collin
distribution by Les Productions Quatre Vins Neufs

Child pornography I can do without but, really, this just ends up looking silly. Buñuel created shocking images which stay in the mind long after the film has ended. These filmmakers can only invoke the ghosts of Van Gogh and Artaud but they cannot live up to them.

In some ways the film is reminiscent of Gilles Groulx's Vingt-quatre heures ou plus; especially in its use of a collage technique made up of cinema-verité sections, video inserts and the use of voiceover commentary. As in Groulx's film, La Couleur also invokes the Réfus Global. But it lacks its rigorous Marxist analysis of a wide spectrum of Quebec society and politics. By focusing only on the plight of the artist within society, La Couleur turns the cry of anger into a whine of protest. Improvisation and spontaneity were the credo of abstract expressionist painters who, in Quebec, were called the automatistes because their painting method was related to that of automatic writing in surrealism. In La Couleur encerclée, it's not only the surrealist vignettes which recall that art movement but also the expressionist frenzy of quick-paced editing and hand-held camera movements.

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