Mireille Dansereau’s 

Le Sourd dans la ville

Mireille Dansereau’s new movie, Le Sourd dans la Ville (Deaf to the City), is a film that has both substance and style. It is tough, it is uncompromisingly serious, and Dansereau’s meticulously constructed images, her resonant moods, her sometimes hypnotic rhythms, draw you in and stay with you. Le Sourd, although easy for some critics to brush off as too slow, too ‘European’ is the kind of movie that goes on living in your memory.

Based on a 1979 novel by Marie-Claire Blais, the film’s narrative line is minimal. An ambiguous sound, a color, the movement of feathery shadows on a child’s face are more important than a twist in the plot. There are no big actions or big dramatic confrontations, but when the film is working at its best, there is a strong sense of being in the minds of the principal characters, and under their skin. Emotions, perceptions, physical sensations, dreams, and memories fuse in tightly and elliptically in edited sequences that portray human consciousness, connections, and destiny as mysterious and contradictory – beyond the grasp of theories or ideologies.

Florence, (Beatrice Picard), is a woman in her 50s, whose husband has abandoned her. Right from the beginning of Le Sourd dans la Ville, she is frozen, disembodied, robotic. A still figure in a tailored grey suit, she stands at a big picture window, watching heavy white clouds moving silently across a deep blue sky. In a kind of trance, Florence picks up a suitcase and leaves her coldly luxurious apartment. Then, as she is about to get into her luxury sedan, her car keys drop out of her hand, and in an intercut, fall to the street in slow motion. Florence has disconnected. She walks away slowly and expressionlessly, wanders through Montreal streets that have an eerie calm.

It was daring for Dansereau to begin the film this way. Florence is not a character you can empathize with easily, and you’ve seen terminally alienated creatures like her before – in Antonioni’s films and elsewhere. Dansereau increases the risks by joining the early images of Florence to spatially unrelated, and inexplicable web, a small boy having a nightmare, a cactus, a window, watching heavy white clouds moving silently and her selfishness. She delights in dancing topless; she collects porno magazines; she expects Mike to cook the spaghetti she feeds everybody; and she allows her daughter, Lucie, to sell herself. Gloria is part of the mean, tough world she inhabits. The tension between the contradictory aspects of her nature, like the movie’s tension between beauty and pain, gives Le Sourd dans la Ville much of its power.

Near the end of the film, Florence sits on the staircase that leads to the hotel bar, watching the people in it like a child observing and learning about adults. Mike coaxes her into eating a plate of Gloria’s spaghetti. She is moved by his tenderness, and by his premature knowledge of suffering. The ice cracks; emotions begin to quiver on Florence’s face.

But when Mike and Florence’s fingers reach out and touch, the little boy, tormented by nightmares of death, is touching death’s hand in the flesh. He can’t save Florence from her fate. She has come to Gloria’s “Hotel des Voyous” to rediscover life in the moments before she leaves it. Florence turns away from the overheated bar and walks back up the staircase. The shots of the pure, white-capped peaks and the clear blue sky reappear. We hear a gunshot, and Mike screams soundlessly. Florence’s heavenly mountains are his hell.

Mireille Dansereau’s Le Sourd dans la Ville has its flaws. For example, Ginette Bellavance’s minimalist music tends toward your classic heavy art-film score, and some of Dansereau’s images and symbols recur too often, too insistently. However, none of this can explain why the picture hasn’t received, in this country, the attention it deserves. Le Sourd did not get a single Genie nomination, while at the Venice Film Festival, it shared an award with Malle’s Au Revoir les enfants. Maybe the members of the Academy would have been more sympathetic if Florence had shot an elephant.

Maurice Aliot

Le Sourd dans la Ville