Richard Boutet’s
La Guerre oubliée

With La Guerre oubliée, a film which shows us how Quebecers lived through the First World War, Richard Boutet succeeds in combining classical documentary, TV-style drama and live theatre in an entertaining and instructive manner. Quebecois filmmakers have rarely shown us our history in a more contemporary fashion. Even if the means sometimes seem to distract us from the message, La Guerre nevertheless proves its worth in the new genre it promotes.

La Guerre’s style finds its roots in Boutet’s 1984 film on The Great Depression, La Turlutte des anées dures. Boutet and his co-director, Pascal Gélinas, combined archival footage, newspaper headlines and old popular songs with interviews in which middle-aged men and women recount how they lived through those difficult years. For example, one of them shows us around a log cabin in Abitibi, and, as he talks, we imagine the long rows of beds, the loss of privacy and the harsh weather he and his companions had to endure. La Turlutte remains interesting, especially for its historical value, but is not very engaging: the viewer has a hard time feeling the misery of those men for their testimony is not supported by visual evidence.

Archival film and newspaper headlines are also used in La Guerre, but Boutet combines them with fictional scenes that recreate particular moments of the years 1870 to 1918. Easier to “read” by the spectator, they provide visual background to the verbal and written information, and make a link with other non-fictional scenes.

Joe Bocan, a well-known Quebecois singer and actor contributes to the film’s cohesiveness. He personifies the “Madelon”, a popular figure from a French drinking song, which recurs throughout the film. Before a reconstructed stage where film archives are rear-projected, Bocan sings of the wounded and the dead, of the harsh weather he and his companions had to endure. La Turlutte remains interesting, especially for its historical value, but is not very engaging: the viewer has a hard time feeling the misery of those men for their testimony is not supported by visual evidence.

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