Jacques Godbout’s

Alias Will James

The relationship between Quebec and America has been of great interest to Jacques Godbout, writer and filmmaker, for many years. His latest film, a documentary, called Alias Will James, tries to investigate this relationship through a study of the Western writer, Will James, who was really Ernest Dufault, born in St. Nazaire d’Aston, Quebec. Will James had fabricated for himself an identity true to the image of the authentic cowboy, born and bred in the far West and this even in his autobiography.

In the last years of his life, when some of his books had been made into successful Hollywood films, he was terrified that his true identity would be found out and that he would be accused of being a fake. But, even so, he still came back to Quebec, to see his mother and eattourttes. Like another well-known “American” Quebecois writer, Jack Kerouac, he became an alcoholic at the end of his life and died of sclerosis.

To tell this story, Godbout has adopted a form of filmic collage which is becoming quite prevalent in the new documentary films coming out of Quebec. In these films there is a collage of different cinematic modes being used, both in the visuals and in the soundtrack. Thus, some of the soundtrack consists of an actor (whom we sometimes see on the screen) reading from Will James’ novels and his autobiography.

Sometimes this voice-over is superimposed on images of the places concerned, the wide-open spaces of the far West or the jail in Carson City where he spent time for cattle rustling. We also see images of the little village in Quebec where he was born, old photographs of Montreal in the 20s, and over these we hear another voice, one which relates the true origins of Ernest Dufault, alias Will James. And to mix-up our sense of reality even further, there are also clips from old Hollywood Westerns (I presume made from Will James’ stories) which are cut in throughout the film. It is here that one of the basic questions of the film emerges. That is, what is the relationship between reality and fiction, life and myth? Here was a man who fell in love with the myth of the West and first, through his drawings and then through his writings made of that myth a reality to millions and of his life a legend which had little relation to his own identity.

Godbout explores the questions further through a series of interviews with representatives of Quebec in the West. There is a discussion with Ernest Dufault’s relatives about who he was and his roots in Quebec. There is an interview with Ian Tyson, the well-known folk singer, who was inspired by Will James’ books, which he read as a child, to become a cowboy and we listen to a song which he wrote about his hero. There are also interviews with two contemporary Quebecois cowboys, who, like Will James, could not resist the lure of the West and became bronco riders.

What is this lure of the West? What motivates someone like Will James to leave his family and culture behind and to try to find himself another reality? Ian Tyson, at one point in the film, says that he tried to write a verse for Will James’ song, where his mother warns him that he dreams too much and that dreams are dangerous. In the process of trying to become a cowboy, Ernest Dufault killed a man in Western Canada, sent to the States, got caught rustling cattle and spent time in prison. It is here that he decided to settle down and try to make it as an illustrator of Western scenes. In other words, he decided to fabricate the dreams rather than be led astray by them. That this relationship between Western myth and Western reality still exists is shown in an interview with one of the Quebecois bronco riders. He too is an artist, a sculptor, and as in Will James’ drawings, his subjects are mostly horses and their riders. Of course, Ian Tyson is also an example of an artist cowboy.

What is the myth of the West and why should it exercise such fascination on non-Americans? Presumably, this is an American myth and little related to our national identity and presumably even less to that of a Quebecois. The film never really answers this question except, maybe, through its images. The collage technique of this film gives us bits and pieces of information but, as in an Eisenstein montage, it is up to the audience to put together the pieces and find an answer. What stays in the mind is the coldness, the closed-off quality of the environment shown in the images of the small Quebec village and even of 1920s Montreal. This impression is reinforced by the sequence where we see one of the bronco riders moving out of his rustic Montreal apartment to escape to the wide-open spaces of Alberta.

The views of Ian Tyson’s ranch with the horses walking through the mist, the views of Will James’ ranch in Montana which he tried to make into a paradise, serve to make us aware of the conflict of the West. The basic conflict in the American Western is between individual freedom and the restrictions imposed by society. The lone cowboy at one with his horse and nature recurs throughout the film. Yet, as in the American Western, values come into conflict with this freedom and the film constantly refers to Dufault’s mother’s warning. Godbout seems to see in Will James’ life and death a sort of parallel, a warning to the Quebecois that to succumb to the lure of America, and its individualistic ideals and dreams of freedom, mean a loss of identity and ultimately be deadly, not only for the individual, but also for the Quebecois nation.

At long last these thoughts and reflections that the film brought to my mind. Jacques Godbout has certainly made an interesting and thought-provoking film.

Mary Alexander-Galway

Morley Markson’s

Growing Up in America

In the interest of honesty it must be admitted that the critic comes to this film with certain skewed preconceptions. My wife comes from Worcester, Massachusetts, and has had to battle all her adult life with the unfounded brouhaha of Canadians who have never heard, much less can pronounce, the name of her home town. To get around this she has developed a kind of capitalized Worcester history that she can spew out in 89 seconds.

Worcester is where Freud gave his first American lectures; it is where Goddard started the U.S. rocket program; it is where the inventor of the birth control pill comes from (well, actually, he comes from the little town next door), and, my wife finishes with a triumphant flourish, Worcester is where Yippie Abbie Hoffman was born.

Abbie Hoffman is always at the end of the line because she can add, for those who want to know more, that he was good friends with her next-door neighbour (now lawyer to the Rock Stars) and for those who are really interested, she notes her family knew the Hoffman family from long-standing. She doesn’t really reveal is the pursued-lipped analysis which her family indulges in when the A. Hoffman name is brought up. The word, from one and all, is that “he broke his father’s heart.” By this they mean a literal heart attack and a more figurative attack on the heart.

I indulge in this discussion because its images—a montage of Worcester-related things and giving Hoffman parents—kept reappearing in my mind during Morley Markson’s cinematic remembrance of times lost if not entirely past. Twenty years after the height of hippiedom the grouping together of the film’s star subjects, including the famous Mr. Hoffman, is as eerie as my wife’s Worcesteriana.

What Markson has done is go back and visit a number of the people who originally appeared in his 1971 documentary Breathing Together: The Evolution of the Electric Family. Then they were all adjectives: hairy and hip, druggy and revolutionary, sexy and poetic; men (interestingly not women) whose media-hogging politics put them less on the same side than in the same (maybe outer) space. Now they have become middle-aged occupational nouns: social activists, lawyer, father, poet, student, and businessman. Only Black Panther Fred Hampton escaped the slow, grammatical death out of youth by finding his future under the career heading of “dead.”

The technique the movie uses to revisit its past is both an interesting of the earlier film and a
Abbie Then and Now: Tales of Hoffman

Finding of that incarnation of themselves to the film's subjects. Their reaction to themselves per se is often quite hilarious. Former White Panther John Sinclair admits that the deposed-child boy he was would frighten the family-crazed father he has become. "If somebody walked up to me today and started talking like this, I'd probably be frightened. You know, Get this guy outta here."

Allen Ginsberg tries to forgive himself for saying the "wrong mantra all along". Jerry Rubin talks about waking up one morning in 1974 and finding that the whole scene he has been involved in had disappeared. Everyone had disconnected their phones and moved away.

The saddest confrontations of then and now are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conservatives. They are revealed in the lives of the two blacks in the film. Don Cox, a Black Panther who fled the country and now lives in Paris, speaks a kind of limited English-French no-man's language. He has had none of the life's second chances which seemed to have abandoned the white and, not surprisingly, views his life as a kind of shadow of reality. "Nobody cares as long as I don't break the law. I'm satisfied here. I really don't want any attention," he says. We have no idea how he survives except as a kind of Kafkaesque Hunger Artist made up to look like God's lost Watati.

Fred Hampton's wife and son have plunged from the poetry of the Movement into the reality of the '80s. The political dreams of the Fashers have been replaced by street trapping. What is most interesting is that those of the '60s who changed least, Abbie Hoffman and movement lawyer William Kunstler, come across in some sense like the film's true conservatives. They found a space for themselves and a truth and it sense like the film's true conserv