Ken Pittman's  
Finding Mary March

Ken Pittman, in a CBC radio interview, talks about probing history in an urgent need to include on screen these images that are ours, not necessarily what is on screen otherwise. Pittman's 1988 feature film is a dramatic narrative, situated in the present. However, the past holds a primary and fascinating place in the film, both within the narrative and the style. The actual Beothuk burial sites and artifacts are used in a present day, gripping tale which concerns the extinct race's history. Moreover, a constant duality of themes, seen seemingly attached to the Beothuks' haunting past, yet belonging also to the present story, create a sense of time which resists clear delineation. Here, parallel stories go back and forth to create a style where past and present intertwine and we read across the lines in order to reflect on the issues the film brings out.

Pittman chose a present-day story about a few individuals to examine how people relate, to exist, love and hate. By including important history in the way he has, Pittman pushes questions to their limits. What emerges are the limits to which man will go in his interactions with other, nature or humanity. The story is about a young archeological photographer from Montreal whose job is to photograph the Beothuk burial grounds. She arrives in Newfoundland dependent on trapper Ted Cormack to guide her down the river and show her the Beothuk burial sites. Ted and his daughter Bernadette have found a clue to a treasure in the river and support Nancy's embrace in a tender scene that, like the scenes of people making a horse's head, brings out a_right path has been designed for each; they move on another, bumping and gliding, surprising us with their turns.

Performances by Rick Boland (Cormack) and André Pelletier (George) are solid. Boland manoeuvres through the land and waterscapes with the ease of one truly at home. His display of Ted's vulnerability comes when Cormack loses his emotional footing upon the discovery of his wife's body. A year's worth of uncertainty and pain surface. Boland convincingly tears Ted's tears which are met by Nancy's embrace in a tender scene that, like many others in the film, get at Pittman's wish to explore the ways in which we coexist with one another. In this scene, Cormack and George's differences, which earlier in the film are the source of inflammation, are accepted now and do not interfere with their interdependence. Nancy is able to pull Ted out of the stormy water when his canoe is lost and support him in his time of grief.

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Like a traditional narrative, where a reconciliation of nature with the hero comes after a number of challenges, where evil is brought to resolution, here a spiraling of conflicts moves through the story. Nancy, in her eagerness for information rushes into the grave. Amidst these conflicts, a young Indian shows Ted where Monica's body is and Nancy is left alone to deal with the unknown. The film's focus moves smoothly from one character to the next, each plight is equally important. Our sympathies are never locked in one direction as each character changes, along with our feelings for them. It is not as a right path has been designed for each; they move on another, bumping and gliding, surprising us with their turns.

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Pelletier was given an interesting and challenging role as the photographer who at first appears entering in a self-centered way, ignoring those around her. As her character develops we warm up to Nancy, not so much because she sees evil ways but because she is responsible for her actions. Finally, and has faith in herself. George arrives, from the city, at a remote village in the interior of Newfoundland, to find nature and people hostile to her. In the wilderness, the wind blows her records and notes away; as she tries to retrieve them a moving camera shot in closeup traces her action. Her guide leaves her, somebody tampers with her journal, but the woman does not falter. She spits into the water washing herself; at night when the bugs threaten to eat her alive, she applies a mud mask to protect herself. Her face, covered in the reddish clay, recalls the opening of the film when Indian women perform a ritual to bury Mary March: they are covered and over the dead princess face with the earth, an action which has meaning for the spirit moving into the next life. Nancy's large scales of observation, as the eyes of the Indian women. In fact, George's own heritage, her origins possibly being tribal, is another element within the film's narrative. Bernadette, in her assured way, tells George that from the photograph she has seen of Nancy's father he is certainly Indian.

Tara Manuel makes her screen acting debut in Finding Mary March. She plays a memorable Bernadette, a proud and defiant young woman whose close ties to nature allow her to live through life's pain and injustices. She finds solace and meaning in the wilderness, returning a stray pup to a pack of wild dogs or a special animal to its proper owner. She is at home with rocks, using them to vent her anger or meditate, at home in the trees which offer her the best vantage points, and on the water, the source of life and death. Bernadette is free.

Again, the film's complexity of relationships allows for intimate moments between Nancy and Bernadette while the violence between them continues throughout the story until their ultimate confrontation at the end of the film. During their journey Bernadette begins to menstruate. Flustered, not knowing what is happening, she is helplessly initiated into this new phase of life by Nancy who washes Bernadette's bloody jeans in the river and gives her a brightly colored wrap-sarit to wear.

Earth, air, water and fire are as important to Finding Mary March as is the well-constructed narrative. The elements of nature we see and hear so exceptionally in the film are no mere back, fore or midground in which the characters play out their parts, but are of shapes and sounds signify on their own. The actual killing of Mary March is only one scene where nature is used in a far-reaching way. Set in the cold, white, barren winter, this carefully done scene has been partially shot in slow motion as there are three other significant points in the film. Each time, this cinematic device adds subtle emphasis. Unlike the familiar use of slow motion as flourish, here it is part of the film's weave. The violation of the Beothuks is exemplified through images and sounds that push for inquiry and thought.

The funeral of Mary March

leaves in the canoe to find Bernadette who has gone off on her own to replace the bone pendant in its proper grave. Ted encounters a raging storm that night while Bernadette confronts her absolute fury for the photographer, rober of the grave. Amidst these conflicts, a young Indian shows Ted where Monica's body is and Nancy is left alone to deal with the unknown. The film's focus moves smoothly from one character to the next, each plight is equally important. Our sympathies are never locked in one direction as each character changes, along with our feelings for them. It is not as a right path has been designed for each; they move on another, bumping and gliding, surprising us with their turns.

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Jean Pierre Lefebvre's
La boîte à soleil/ The Box of Sun

Part experimental feature, part children's film, part formal essay and part pure whimsy, The Box Of Sun presents us with all sorts of problems. The first is that there is no dialogue. The second is that the sombre, primitivist soundtrack seems to repeat the same endless interval. The third is the uneasy animation that interrupts the shots of post-industrial urban decay. The fourth and most important, is the splintered dramatic sequences consisting of a group of children wandering through grey forests attempting to capture, and then unleash upon the world, the box of sun of the title. Lefebvre, whose importance to the Canadian cinema cannot be underestimated (the 1981 Critics' Award at Cannes for Les Fleurs Sauvages amongst others), has presented us with a challenge with his latest film: changing and/or ignoring the accepted notions of film grammar. The necessary accelerated plot development of the last few years, so essential for the wide audience that Canadian film has been reaching amongst others, has presented us with a profound film it is. Certainly Blood Relations contains an abundance of familiar motifs in the thriller vein. The characters are instantly recognizable: Jan Rubes playing Vincent Price as the mad scientist, Kevin Hicks, a young Mel Gibson, as his son, and Lydie Denier as his fiancee, reminiscent of the late Romy Schneider. The story is a loose hodge-podge of The Bride Of Frankenstein and Oedipus Rex, where both father and son, Andrew and Thomas Wells, do battle for Thomas's fiancée, Marie, who ironically of course resembles Andrew's late wife. In true Agatha Christie tradition, there are a lot of unanswered questions and holes to be filled in right off the bat, keeping the audience on their toes. Apparently both Thomas and Marie have plans to knock off Andrew in order to inherit the fortune left by Andrew's ailing father-in-law (played by your favourite Marlan, Ray Walston) . The problem, of course, is that no one is quite sure whether Gramp will leave the money to Andrew, already a wealthy neurosurgeon, or to Thomas, the gallivanting playboy grandson.

And so the manipulation commences, with Marie being alternately attracted by both father and son's displays of virility, and repulsed by their warped sense of humour. However, there is a singular flaw in the pacing of the script, as there is little time allowed for building suspense. Andrew and Thomas throw sexual puns back and forth at one another with frightening effect is finally presented, its impact is, shall we say, somewhat subdued. For a good portion of the film, there is a deliberate ambiguity as to the intentions and integrity of the characters involved. Now if only we can be allowed to empathize with them a bit, we will accordingly be expected to believe in and