

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 those images that are ours, not necessarily what is on screen otherwise. Well, probing leads to knowledge and the result for Pittman is *Finding Mary March*, his first feature film. His own quest for a certain knowledge, the history of the Beothuks, a long extinct race of Newfoundland Indians, began several years ago when he directed a documentary on this aboriginal group for the National Film Board. *Finding Mary March* is a film which has grown out of the work done for this documentary, which was completed in 1980. 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 duplicity of themes, themes 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 beyond flashback to create a style where past and present intermingle 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, coexist, 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 sites. Ted and his daughter Bernadette know every inch of this territory as they have spent a year searching for the body of Monica, his wife, her mother, who drowned in these waters. Ironically, in their search they unearthed the body of Mary March, or Demasduit, the last princess of the Beothuk people. In desperate need to pay a court fine caused by a dispute with a visiting collector, Ted grudgingly accepts to show photographer Nancy George the graves.

The four-day journey begins. A simple, exquisite long take in long shot exposes the relationship of the three travellers. Ted and Nancy kneel in a canoe, slowly they move downwater, while Bernadette, unhappy about



The funeral of Mary March

the trip (she guards the land's secrets suspiciously from intruders) speeds by in a motorboat, angrily exiting the frame, while the trapper and the archeologist continue together in awkward silence. Michael Jones' cinematography coheres with Pittman's idea that a physical reality leads to an understanding or knowledge reality. Jones shows us, through the long take, nature and humanity. If here the green trees, dark water and blue sky seem to compliantly let the travellers pass through into their journey, it is only a quiet beginning. As the film progresses, we come to understand through sight, sound and story how nature never acquiesces. On the journey nature is in constant play with the characters' actions. Pittman uses this interaction to create tension and the narrative carries with it a series of events that inspire both fear and curiosity.

Unlike 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 spiralling of conflicts moves through the story. Nancy, in her eagerness for information rushes into the graves, taking no time to acknowledge the dead there. As she reaches for an engraved bone pendant, rocks fall and crush her hand. She makes off, despite this accident, with carvings which might be a key to the Beothuk language. Cormack is furious with her greed and disrespect but listens as she defends herself. For Nancy George, "it is always better to know", and these acquisitions may lead to knowledge. Cormack, too, believes in striving for knowledge. His wife Monica was a Micmac who had worked hard on finding links between different aboriginal groups, she was respected by many for the wisdom of the spirits she was believed to possess.

Unable to contain his anger though, Ted

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, robber 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 and a terrible host of bugs. 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 if a right path has been designed for each; they move around one another, bumping and gliding, surprising us with their turns.

Performances by Rick Boland (Cormack) and Andrée Pelletier (George) are solid. Boland manoeuvres through the land and waterscapes with the ease of one truly akin to his surroundings. 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 cries 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.

Pelletier was given an interesting and challenging role as the photographer who at first appears enterprising in a self-centered way, ignoring those around her. As her character develops we warm up to Nancy, not so much because she sees her 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 wonderful 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 cover the dead princess' face with the earth, an action which has meaning for the spirit moving into the next life. Nancy's large brown eyes, so full of life, resemble those 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 most 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 whether returning a stray pup to a pack of wild dogs or a special amulet to its proper buried 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 helpfully 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-skirt 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: color, 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 have 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. If the

spiritual has to do with the production of knowledge as a response to the demands one encounters in life, if this knowledge is gathered as lore, that is through study, experience, tradition and intuition, then *Finding Mary March* is a spiritual film. Pittman's attempts to answer compelling questions about how we act integrate many ways of knowing and we can't help but know a little more after watching and listening to *Finding Mary March*.

Patricia Kearns •

FINDING MARY MARCH co-exec. p. Stirling Norris p./prod. man. Rob Iveson d./sc. Ken Pittman d.o.p. Michael Jones 1st. a.d. Paul Pope 2nd a.d. Barbara Doran 1st. asst. cam. Dominique Gusset 2nd asst. cam. Jamie Lewis gaffer Bob Petrie key grip Nigel Markham genny op. Robert McDonald cont. Barbara Gordon asst. p. man. Janice Ripley p. sec. Susan McGrath bookkeeper Eleanor Merrigan art d. Pam Hall asst. art. d. Peter Walker set dec. Francine Fleming prop master Dave Roe cost. des. Peggy Hogan hair/makeup Paulette Cable sd. rec. Jim Rillie boom op. Alex Salter p.a.'s Barry Nichols, Bill Dancey, Sharon Halfyard, Erika Pittman pub. Kevin Pittman ed. Derek Norman asst. ed. Antonia McGrath sd. ed. Les Hallman l.p. Andree Pelletier, Rick Boland, Tara Manuel, Des Walsh, Austin Davis, Paul Rome, Mary Lewis. A Red Ochre Production. dist. Malofilm Group.



Simon Esterez in *The Box of Sun*

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 Critic's 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 lately, is nowhere to be found in *The Box of Sun*. Instead, Lefebvre gives us Arsinee Khanjian (*Family Viewing*) wandering around concrete highway interchanges in a blond wig like Monica Vitti in Antonioni's *The Red Desert*. Bushes have been painted onto the concrete supports like spindly ghosts of the ones that

might have been there before; roaring motorcycle point-of-view shots suddenly appear and disappear. The sun stays behind a lushly overcast cover. A sensuously logical array of pipes, steam and tanks ominously belches life, the sea heaves with dark promise.

This montage, running through the film until the brighter resolution at the end brought on by the children, is no ironic commentary. Rather it brings a pulverizing context for the dramatic sequences to overcome. Lefebvre has kept the irony for the animation, which begins innocently enough with the group of children cutting consumer images from domestic magazines. In a blast of whimsy, a gust of wind blows the images from the children's room into a world of their own. The irony is, of course, that the images of lips, household appliances and consumer items have an animate life of their own already. Lefebvre's sometimes crude and quite delightful animations also break the dank and threatening landscapes of what's left of the natural world into digestible bits. They also serve to reinforce our sense of distance by interrupting the flow; it's a technique often used by Godard to remind us that we are watching a movie rather than participating in the story itself.

The manipulation of images in *The Box of Sun* is very plain and yet manages to steer clear of triteness. The group of children who provide the main dramatic interest in the film are never reduced to cuteness. Rather they are utilized in the film to help restore life to the world with their boxes of sunlight. Their mythic overtones are held in check, however, by their very unassuming winter clothing and the modestness of their silhouettes against the snowbound winter forest. The box of sun that finally is opened, after a strange and inconclusive

journey, brings the sun out from behind the clouds and returns the world to an unsettled normalcy complete with joyous shards of rainbows flitting over Atom Egoyan and Arsinee Khanjian, while cluttered sidewalk traffic replaces the solitary roaring motorcycles.

The fairytale-like quality of *The Box of Sun* does not bear much relation to the *Tales for All* series. Indeed, the indefinite narrative defies the simplicity inherent in a linear narrative. It is through a different approach, a richly associative and aesthetic approach, that *Box of Sun* starts to resemble the urgent simplicity of a folk-tale.

Jean Pierre Lefebvre's *The Box of Sun* is almost an exercise in the nature of the purity of cinema itself, devoid of the distractions of conventional word-driven drama. Its formal aspects, however, are always tempered with a playful, self-referential sensibility. We are never allowed to forget that we are watching a film, not disappearing into one. And a challenging, provocative, plaintive and finally deeply profound film it is.

Ronald Foley Macdonald •

LA BOITE A SOLEIL / THE BOX OF SUN a film by Jean Pierre Lefebvre d.o.p. Lionel Simmons asst. cam. Dominique Gusset grip Raymond Lemy asst. grip Jerome Sabourin loc. man. Louis Ricard sd. mix Michel Charron ed. Barbara Easto titles Simon Esterez soundtrack Jean Pierre Lefebvre lab. Bellevue Pathe Quebec timing Pierre Campeaux neg. edit NegBec p. asst. Halifax Terry Greenlaw 2nd p. asst. Halifax David Middleton l.p. Joseph Champagne, Arsinee Khanjian, Simon Esterez, Barbara Easto, Atom Egoyan, Jerome Sabourin, Simon Easto Lefebvre, Herman Hamilton Colyer, Timothy Heyligen, Scott Menard, Karen Mae Simms, Jerry Bannister, Mark Burgess, Trevor Cohen, Heather Davis, Roger Honeywell, Lisa Robertson. A Cinak Ltd. production with a grant from the Canada Council. 16 mm, colour running time 73 minutes.

Graeme Campbell's
Blood Relations

One of the safest bets in the film industry is the "genre" movie. That is to say, the audience knows exactly what to expect once the lights grow dim, be it Stallone in an action picture, Pee Wee Herman in a comedy, or any number of pubescent nonentities in teen adventure flicks.

Blood Relations, directed by Graeme Campbell, falls into the thriller/suspense category. At times, however, it also lapses into that of a comedy and/or horror movie, but unfortunately without the desired results. It is this basic ineffectiveness of deciding what emotion to elicit from the viewer that mars its potential strength. Because the formula for a suspense film is so well known to the audience, with its cliché characterizations, hackneyed settings and plot twists, one often speculates as to whether the filmmaker falls into self-parody on purpose or by accident.

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 fiancée, 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 Martian, Ray Walston). The problem, of course, is that no one is quite sure whether Gramps 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 the regularity of a Mae West, so that once a 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