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 Kears •


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 integrating many ways of knowing and we can’t help but know a little more after watching and listening to Finding Mary March.

Simon Esterez in The Box of Sun

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

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. The box of sun of the title, 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 non-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 fairy-tale-like quality of The Box Of Sun does not bear much relation to the Tales for All. Indeed, the inedible 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, playful and finally deeply profound film it is.

Ronald Foley Macdonald •


Graeme Campbell’s
Blood Relations

One of the latest bets in the film industry is the “genre” movie. That is to say, the audience knows exactly what to expect once the lights go dim, but Stallone in an action picture, Pee Wee Herman in a comedy, or any number of dubious nonentities in teen adventure flicks. Blood Relations, directed by Graeme Campbell, falls into this 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 Marian, Ray Walston). The problem, of course, is that no one is quite sure whether Gramp’s 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 punches 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
identify with their ensuing course of action. But after listening to the continual drivel coming out of their mouths, this seldom happens. It is no surprise, then, that the most effective segments of Blood Relations are Marie's dream sequences of Andrew and Thomas lurking after her. They are skillfully directed with an efficient distortion of both the voices and motions of the actors. Towards the end of the film, when Marie is running down a corridor into Andrew's secret operating room, you are genuinely startled to find out that this is no dream sequence. At this point, the film finally delivers the goods, only to end in a madcap, free-reigned barrage of lurid and cliched (the resistance) saying, "We must fight and trust that our holy war will be won." After the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghans mounted a guerrilla war, which, contrary to all expectations, culminated in the eventual withdrawal of Russian troops nearly nine years later. Unlike Vietnam, the jihad, or holy war, remained largely uncovered by the press. Martyn Burke's Witnesses attempts to rectify these gaps in information. What emerges is a portrait of a country and its people as seen through the eyes of various French, British, and American volunteers and correspondents. As well, deserters from the Soviet army tell of their mounting disillusionment and horror when faced with the atrocities perpetrated by their own troops upon the Afghans. The top leaders of the Mujahideen speak of the tactical maneuvers used to gain advantage over Soviet strongholds. In most cases, the interviews are interspersed with footage showing the speakers' involvement in the Afghan struggle, whether it be giving medical aid, teaching, or preparing to go into battle. One of the most well-known Mujahideen commanders, Ahmad Shah Massoud, known as the "Lion of the Panjshir", prepares his men in one sequence to capture the depot of Naran in the capital of Kabul. The tactics he used in 1986, marked a change in fighting strategy. Until then, the typical methods used were quick ambushes. Massoud now decided to launch a large-scale attack against this key position. The ultimately successful battle plan is outlined with the aid of graphics. Combat footage combined with the dispassionate narration doesn't minimize the impact of seeing the tape distort suddenly, as a voice relates that the Afghan cameraman, who filmed the sequence, was at that moment killed instantly as "a bullet went into the camera, a videotape, and into his head..." Director Burke places his "witnesses" against a simple background in the interview sequences. Their Western clothing in this staging contrasts sharply with their physical presence in the Afghan landscape where they were the clothing of the country. These are individuals who have placed their lives at the service of the Afghan people in their war of liberation. Afghanistan is a hard country without an overabundance of amenities emanating from its village economy. Michael Barry, a former Princeton scholar, who became involved in Afghanistan says, "The most