

# FILM REVIEWS

Donald Brittain's

## Volcano

**d:** Donald Brittain, **sc:** Donald Brittain, **narr:** Brittain, words of Malcolm Lowry spoken by Richard Burton, **ph:** Douglas Kiefer, **ed:** John Kramer, **sd. ed.:** Les Halman, **sd. rec.:** James McCarthy, **m:** Alain Clavier, **jazz arrang:** Arts Phillips, **exec. p:** James de B. Domville, **p.c.:** National Film Board of Canada, 1976, 16mm, color, **running time:** 100 minutes, **dist:** N.F.B.

Every couple of years, the National Film Board turns out a film of such magnitude that it makes one believe that despite the waste and ineptitude, the place is worth it. Every couple of years, Donald Brittain gets his considerable talent organized behind a project he can relate to and produces a film of outstanding power. Such a film is **Volcano**, the flesh-and-blood portrait of a man possessed.

*"I sometimes think of myself as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return to give his knowledge to the world. But the name of this land is Hell - not Mexico, of course, but in the heart."*

Malcolm Lowry was one of the great literary geniuses of our age, but ours is an age hard on genius. He wrote only one book worth reading; it took him eight years and in the process, it destroyed him. Haunted by homosexuality, guilt and paranoia, his life was a downward spiral of impotence, alcoholism and - ultimately - insanity. The book, his legacy, is the intense and searing personal account of his odyssey. But the blackness is not without its humor, the



desolation not without its hope. He begins the book with a quote from Sophocles, "Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man..."

At the age of 27, Lowry had settled in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He had come out of a restrictive, upper-class British background, somewhat of a playboy. He and his family had a mutual hatred for each other but his father faithfully supported him through all his ukulele-toting, alcoholic misadventures. Everyone who met him knew he was a genius, but a genius bent on self-destruction. Three years earlier, he had written a witty little novel whose only virtue was that it got published. "His passport called him a writer, but he considered his only book an embarrassment; his entire life an embarrassment."

In this squalid and beautiful Mexican village, Lowry seemed to have at last found a home, his own private hell. At the foot of the two mountains Popocatepepl and Ixtaccihuatl he began his life's work, an alcoholic collage of evil, suffering, squalor and humor unfolding amidst the terrifying, pathetic images of Mexico's Day of the Dead. He lived in this village less than two years, but it would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Most attempts to convert great literature into film are bleak failures. This is particularly true of modern

literature which goes well beyond the cops and robbers level which film handles so well. How do you find visual analogies for the words of *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*? How do you take something whose power lies in one medium and translate it into something as intransigent as film? A rose is not a book is not a movie. Brittain uses the author's own life as the key to his work. The film weaves back and forth from the world and images of his life, to that of his novel. What results is a Picasso-like multi-perspective truth, a truth about Lowry and a truth about the human condition.

The film draws much of its considerable power from its source. Like any standard documentary, it consists largely of interviews and narrated sequences with pictures of Lowry's life. But the similarity ends there. The subject of this film becomes its object, the book becomes the words becomes the images becomes the people with such a fluidity that you are no longer seeing a movie about something or someone, you are not outside looking in at someone's life, you have become part of his life, part of his vision and part of his suffering. In a way which up till now has been reserved for only the greatest of literature, **Volcano** goes beyond conventional documentary,

**Film Credit Abbreviations:** d.: Director. asst. d.: Assistant Director. sc.: Script. adapt.: Adaptation. dial.: Dialogue. ph.: Photography. sp. ph. eff.: Special Photographic Effects. ed.: Editor. sup. ed.: Supervising Editor. sd.: Sound. sd. ed.: Sound Editor. sd. rec.: Sound Recording. p. des.: Production Designer. a.d.: Art Director. set dec.: Set Decorator. m.: Music. m.d.: Music Director. cost.: Costumes. choreo.: Choreography. l.p.: Leading Players. exec. p.: Executive Producer. p.: Producer. assoc. p.: Associate Producer. p. sup.: Production Supervisor. p. man.: Production Manager. p.c.: Production Company. col.: Colour Process. dist.: Distributors. narr.: Narration.

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beyond fiction into a rarefied world of its own. It is among the greatest movies I have ever seen.

Brittain is no newcomer to films (see **Cinema Canada** no. 15 pp. 36-40). Over the years, his films have won just about every prize given to documentaries around the world. They all have the Brittain touch – extremely well structured with a fine appreciation for the foibles of man, his contradictions as well as his genius. Brittain has a gossip's attention to human detail, his interviews start where other documentaries leave off – the pauses, the asides, and the revealing little glimmers which go beyond the words being spoken. In the narration of Brittain's films you get still more details feeding the curiosity, with its "scorpion sting" construction such that it can backtrack on itself and catch you unawares. In building up a film, this same element of surprise is maintained. Throwing the curves as he calls it, he juggles whatever he is dealing with – past and present, fantasy and fiction, and changes in location – with such dexterity that you are never bored, you never know what's coming next.

With the story of Lowry, Brittain's multifaceted technique has come to its climax. The filmed portrait of Malcolm Lowry hits us from many directions. There is the interview with Lowry's only living brother, Russell; years of pent-up frustration living with this irresponsible, lying, destructive and ultimately embarrassing family legend pour out in an intimate confession to the camera. A school chum, now an old man, tells how Lowry once wrote a song punctuated with a stanza of farts. "Quite remarkable, you know, that he was able to do it at will." Dr. Michael Raymond, his psychiatrist at the British mental institution where he spent much of his last three years, talks about an attempt at inducing an

aversion reaction to alcohol. "He was a very meticulous man and used to wash the vomit off his hands with the glass of milk we would give him afterwards." An ancient schoolteacher declaiming from the front of a classroom remembers that Lowry used to slouch. And finally, his wife/mother Margerie to whom the film is dedicated, describing the heartrending details of their poisoned, blessed life together.

Lowry struggled with the manuscript of *Under the Volcano* through three countries and five drafts for eight tortured years. As Brittain's narration succinctly puts it, "It cost him everything, but in the critical judgment of many, it was no waste." But it was Lowry's literary success that proved to be his final undoing. "Fame is like a drunk; it consumes the house of the soul, exposing that you have worked for only this." Cut to the academics busily at work four biographies and 127 doctoral theses later. The black frocks and tweed jackets natter knowingly to each other about how he crosses his Ts in the last chapter of the third draft.

But this film does more than just show us how other people have regarded this literary genius. In many ways, *Volcano* is by Lowry as well as being about him. Brittain and researcher Bob Duncan spent two weeks in Mexico in search of Lowry images. What they have come up with are not literal images from the book, but pictures of Mexico that drill into the subconscious. The Mexico in the heart that Lowry talks about become the unerasable images of all our dreams. Through an all-seeing, all-feeling alcoholic haze, the filmmaker, Brittain, the author and the narrator, Richard Burton, have achieved a form of communion – a transubstantiation in which the words and the images have become living flesh.

There is a group of Mexican financiers who have bought the film rights for the novel *Under the Volcano*. The book is considered a hot property and was sold for many thousand dollars. Joseph Losey, Orson Wells and other heavies are being considered as possible directors of this future epic. I wish them luck, but I fear that they have been scooped. No actors, no makeup, no lighting or set construction will ever be able to match the reality of this film: the banal, the human, the terrifying and touching document of one man's life – of all our lives.

**Ronald H. Blumer**

**Jean Lefebvre's**

## L'amour blessé

**d:** Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, **asst. d:** Robert Faveaur, **ph:** J.C. Tremblay, **ed:** Marguerite Duparc, **sd:** Jacques Blain, **l.p:** Louise Cuerrier and the voices of Gilles Proulx, Paul Baillargeon, Pierre Curzi, Frédérique Collin, Jean-Guy Moreau, Monique Mercure, Denise Morelle, **p:** Marguerite Duparc, **p.c:** Cinak, 1975, **col:** 35 mm, **running time:** 78 minutes, **dist.:** Disci.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Quebec's most prolific and independent producer-filmmaker, has finished his 14th feature, a film built on sound. Lefebvre's film is as stark visually as it is rich and subtle aurally. It is a film which includes the audience and which counts upon its intelligence and interest to fill out the spaces and the silences he provides.

**Wounded Love** has only one actress, one lonely woman, home alone on a Friday night, listening to a "hot-line" program on the radio. Others are present, but only as sounds. The radio provides the leitmotif of the woman's loneliness when it is not playing the central role itself. The advertisements, the announcers, the people who call in and their problems are the stuff of her evening. There are also the neighbors who are fighting and whom she hears through the wall, her mother-in-law, her estranged husband on the phone, and the pizza deliveryman to whom she does not open the door.

Nothing happens. Not even the camera moves much. Lefebvre is content to hold the image and to let the woman walk in and out of the frame as if her lassitude has affected the whole crew. She does her nails, bathes and listens. She is alone and defeated. The tabloid papers and the sensational hot-lines keep her company and create the sensation of excitement, of something unusual.

In a brief moment of rebellion, she herself phones the hot-line to protest the announcer's cavalier reaction to another woman who wonders whether she should leave her husband. Our lady knows. She has been beaten by her own husband and has left him. She wants to encourage the caller but can't explain why the freedom she fought for should result in such loneliness and desperation. Unable to make her point,



Alone with the radio in *L'amour blessé*

she hangs up, the phone call adding to her defeat.

Her family has heard and she receives threatening phone calls from them. Her solitude turns into terror. Sounds are all around her, but there is no one for her to turn to. She is a model of passivity, a model of what one becomes when emptiness and frustration are constantly fed by the titillations of the yellow press.

The spectator feels a rising violence when Lefebvre confronts him with this woman and her radio. The hot-line is authentic; in Quebec, the hot-lines are enormously popular and

often abusive in tone and content. Although nothing happens on the screen, a lot is happening in the audience. One becomes aware that this sort of radio in itself constitutes an invasion of privacy. It has become dangerous.

When our woman finally turns off her radio, the action is one of self-protection. She cannot, however, turn off her neighbors, and she lives through their lovemaking as vicariously as she had fed on the hot-lines before.

Lefebvre makes a strong statement about our times and the effect of mass media. He is provocative and interesting. But his films are not for the uninformed, the unprepared. His audiences must be willing to participate; he will not entertain them.

An interesting footnote: the film was shot in two evenings, and the total budget was \$53,000. The sound recording and editing took two months, and the Canadian Film Development Corp. participated in the post-production costs.

Connie Tadros

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