

Les Plouffe

by Marc Gervais

Many of us are so convinced that *Les Plouffe* is a landmark film in the evolution of Canadian feature fiction cinema that we write around it, delving into the reasons why it is so important... falling into the clichés surrounding the present state of the industry, and so on. Well, this piece falls into the trap, rambling on around larger questions, using the film to try to re-illuminate the Canadian situation from any number of shifting perspectives. There really is no escaping the fact that *Les Plouffe* is a very important film, and that, for a variety of reasons.

It happens to be a fine movie. Its authenticity would satisfy the demands of the most ferocious of Canadian (or, for that matter, Québécois) cultural chauvinists. Chances are it will enjoy a highly profitable financial career, especially by the time the T.V. mini-series runs are completed. Finally – and hopefully – in a country habitually agonizing over a sterile, adolescent debate that goes on opposing art and culture to commercial viability, *Les Plouffe* may force us to re-define the terms and to come to a more realistic understanding about main-line feature movie life, grounded in a popular base.

A whole set of inhibiting but tenaciously held dogmas come tumbling down when they are examined in the light of the facts surrounding this film. Not long ago one would have marveled that its producer is a woman. That, however, is no longer extraordinary, given the recent role of women in the Quebec film context. Justine Héroux's considerable achievement however, lies rather in her demolishing of the long-held belief that an expensive, "serious" (i.e. not playing down to its audience) francophone film in Canada cannot be financially viable. The big budget (\$5 million), the sheer size of the enterprise, and the mass popularity of the film are matters of record.

Les Plouffe seriously threatens the validity of another widely held, dispiriting and pessimistic convention – to wit, that the present feature film financing policies and structures have given control to executive producers who are simply incapable of making worthwhile films. Then what about Denis Héroux and John Kemeny, joint executive producers of *Les Plouffe*? Surely the time has come for a serious study of individual track records. Are there valid distinctions to be made between those who raise the money and plan the projects? Or are they all equally part of an unhappy lot, destroying the real possibilities of Canadian cinema?

John Kemeny and Denis Héroux are highly relevant case studies because they have been among the most adept of Canadians at navigating through riot only the Canadian filmmaking system but the international as well. Héroux has come a very long way in twelve years – all the way, in fact, from his big money makers, *Valérie* and *L'Initiation* (which few of us consider anything more than

exploitative flicks). Heavily committed, in recent years, to the co-production option, he has worked with Chabrol, Leclouch and Malle (*Atlantic City, USA*) – hardly cheap company, even if not every ensuing film proved a gem. With *Les Plouffe*, Héroux's quest for quality takes on decidedly Canadian cultural overtones.

Kemeny furnishes a rather spectacular example of the Canadian who can go to Hollywood and play the toughest of film games successfully, turning out box office hits like *White Line Fever* and *Ice Castles*. Hardly Canadian cultural content to be sure. But the same Kemeny also produced Canada's first official feature festival entry at Cannes (in 1969), George Kaczender's *Don't Let the Angels Fall*, a film that bogged down, most people felt, precisely because of its excessively heavy and laboured "cultural" good intentions! Be that as it may, within five years Kemeny was to come back successfully with what is generally considered to be English-Canada's finest blend of culture and mass appeal, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

There is at least one unavoidable conclusion in all of this. And that is that at least, some of the producers making it in the present Canadian system are not totally bereft of cultural sensitivity and (let's say it) cultural responsibility.

As one focuses on the more strictly artistic dimension of *Les Plouffe*, an-

other reassessing of sorts is called for. And that centres on the man most responsible for shaping the sights, sounds, and rhythms that we experience as we watch the film – Gilles Carle. Given the nature of the subject, and its role in Canadian culture, it is nothing short of astounding that Carle was chosen as the director to bring *Les Plouffe* to the screen.

Nothing in Carle's previous feature record – with the possible exception of his first effort of sixteen years ago, *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z* – can be said to resemble in any way *Les Plouffe*. Not that Carle has not been held in esteem both in Quebec and France. Indeed, Cannes keeps inviting him back as no other Canadian director. And he is a protégé of sorts of some of Paris' left bank critics, who cherish Carle's corrosive portrait of their *petits cousins canadiens*, and who have sympathized all along with Carle's conscious, aesthetic endeavour to destroy traditional film form and traditional film expectations with each successive film. Up to now, Carle the filmmaker might well have been described as a sort of sophisticated primitive, the backwoods boy from Maniwaki transformed by his art studies at Montreal's École des beaux-arts; Carle the outrageous iconoclast, the *faux naïf*, the "beat"-style poet of Quebec – uneven, brilliant, obsessional, undisciplined, verging on the nihilistic. At best, one step removed from vulgarity, and bursting with creative energy and talent. Depending on viewers' preferences, his work has been judged as marvelous, or dreadful... or highly confusing. But whatever, surely this kind of artist was not the man to bring *Les Plouffe*, sacred icon of Quebec culture, to life on the screen?

And yet, in an amazing *tour de force*, with great artistic skill and what has to be called artistic humility and disci-

pline, Gilles Carle has done just that, sacrificing his style, and the peculiarities of his own "personal universe" to the needs of faithfully transcribing Roger Lemelin's novel for the screen. As has been noted time and again, Carle, with the help of Lemelin himself, has leaped back to the 1948 novel, paying no attention to the series that dominated both English and French television through most of the fifties. Clearly, it is the novel's spirit, dating back to the late forties, that informs the film.

Lemelin's novel and Carle's film: the two are inextricably one. And in that resides the extraordinary nature of Carle's achievement, as well as the shortcomings which prevent the film from reaching the status of masterpiece (whatever that may mean, and however subjective it may be as a critical category.)

Lemelin's novel – and in this it is so typically Canadian – could never be described as lyrical in tone, nor epic or tragic for that matter. Probably the label "ironic" fits best, though the irony is of a special kind, growing out of enormous sympathy and shared experience. Roger Lemelin lived the life of lower Quebec City's working class. Indeed, Denis Boucher, the young writer-to-be, is somewhat autobiographical (the native Quebec character in the novel, that is, and not the young Frenchman of the film). And that is the world that Carle has brought to the screen, thirty-five years after the novel, forty years after the events depicted within that novel.

The same authentic vision, true to a certain segment of society, reflecting that society's hopes and fears, richness and foibles – Carle does not fall short in this essential sense. But he also shares the other aspect of Lemelin's vision. Lemelin chooses people and events. The novel may seem "innocent" in its apparently effortless style. It is, of

● Wartime ambulance driver Ovide (Gabriel Arcand) gives his pal Denis Boucher (Rémi Laurent) a lift



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film may fall short of Lemelin's novel at an even more crucial level. The novel has a lightness of touch. It reveals so much indirectly, it suggests, it captures in depth its characters, its whole social milieu. Suggestion, nuance, delicacy of touch - none of these have ever been strengths in Gilles Carle's work. *Au contraire*, his considerable power operates in the diametrically opposite direction. As a result, some of the movie's romantic aspects verge on sentimental melodrama, deprived of the novel's counterbalancing dryness of style and built-in irony. So, too, for character depth. The surface of the film is obvious, even heavy, inhibiting the penetration of deep insight.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, there will be some viewers - a minority to be sure - who cherish Gilles Carle's cinema precisely because of its intensely personal, jagged, traumatic, more-or-less surrealist texture. The relative 'straightness' of *Les Plouffe*, its less spectacular use of film language, its reducing of its own creative exuberance and uniqueness may well take on for Carle aficionados the dimensions of an aesthetic betrayal, a 'selling out' to commercial cinema.

Or, to put it in the jargon of today's

more militantly ideological film researchers, Carle has been "recuperated" by the dominant system; the whole thrust of his critique has been blunted by his use of banal, bourgeois film language. The film discourse in *Les Plouffe* is no longer direct, personal, "honest." It has degenerated into serving up one more consumer object, in the tradition of "narrative, representational, realistic spectacle," to be savoured as such by a bourgeois audience: no threat, no re-thinking - just consumer in-take.

This kind of critique has its basis in one incontestable fact: Carle's use of film language in *Les Plouffe* has definitely changed. It has become much more accessible to the common viewer. As language, it is far less contestatory, far less subversive as regards the main-line patterns of commercial filmmaking. The implications in all of this are enormous, leading far beyond the primary concerns of this article into the quick-sand areas of semiology, market aesthetics, etc. Indeed, one's judgement on whether this has been a good thing or a bad thing for Carle, depends on just how one lines up on such notions as the nature of popular art, and how far one is committed to this ideology, this or that understanding of knowledge, perception, life. Big questions indeed.

The present writer's 'final judgement'?

1) True, Carle has changed - at least in *Les Plouffe*.

2) True, he is less the *auteur*, the outrageous innovator.

3) True, Lemelin's novel goes deeper into character and culture than does Carle's movie.

4) And, finally, at the purely aesthetic level, there have been fewer features of quality done in Canada.

And yet, my reaction to the film is overwhelmingly positive. In truth, *Les*

Plouffe does constitute a landmark in the history of feature filmmaking in this country. The reasons are apparent, implicit in most of this article - and perhaps, too much taken for granted.

For here is a film that works. Whatever its length, it never fails to fascinate and delight. Whatever the shortcomings, the achievement of Carle and Lemelin in adapting the novel to the screen is a major one. François Protat's photography of the re-created town of lower working-class Quebec City is just right. And just about everything else at that level of the film is just right. One may regret certain intrusions (e.g. a few French actors portraying characters emigrated from France to satisfy the need of the central co-production arrangement with France - which was ultimately dropped in any case), but on the whole *Les Plouffe* represents filmmaking of a remarkably sophisticated industry. There are no apologies needed here... the kind of things that went with being a "young" industry, etc. One need but compare *Les Plouffe* with a very ambitious but terribly marred project of some years ago, *Kamouraska*.

More important is the film's profound rootedness in authentic, popular, Canadian culture. Here, to be sure, the major credit is Lemelin's. But Carle's amazing ability to capture that spirit cannot be dismissed casually or taken for granted.

When was the last time a popular fiction feature movie explored Canada's past? The examples are remarkably, disastrously few. And they become practically non-existent when one adds a few qualifications - to wit, "with such maturity, affection, balanced with irony - and so entertainingly"?

The movie *Les Plouffe* gives one hope that maybe at long last the Canadian cinema is growing up - or maybe even Canadian culture as a whole is growing up - going beyond the stage of sterile adolescent resentment of the past, of everything that really has to do with the notion of being Canadian.

All of this may be overly optimistic. *Les Plouffe* could prove to be just a short, happy moment on the overall gloomy long haul. It is quite possible that the smart people who *know*, who make the decisions, will go on insisting that our film vocation is strictly that of a cheap American extension, imitating what is worst, or most exploitative, in American cinema, and steadfastly refusing to try and do what the Americans themselves do with such remarkable skills, i.e. the exploration and popular re-creating of their own culture.

It may be, too, that a certain cultural 'elite' will go on equating basic 'culture' with the self-indulgent, or esoteric, or totally negativistic cult of that which almost no one else is interested in. And so, the false debate will go on inhibiting authentic film life.

Polemically over-simplified, pretentious perhaps. Yet *Les Plouffe* raises the questions, points at least one of the productive ways - and in so doing raises major hopes for the Québécois film scene, and for Canadian film as a whole.

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course, anything but. Analysis, socio-cultural insight, judgement - the dry, ironic, 'straight' prose records it all in the ruthless light of a very sharp critical awareness.

What results has nothing of the bitterness, distortion, gross caricaturing or negative sentimentalizing that have marked so much of Québécois cinema (and theatre) these last fifteen to twenty years - including much of Gilles Carle's previous feature work. *Les Plouffe* (the movie) has none of Carle's oft-repeated lapses into aesthetic self-indulgence. The usual obsessions and facile or ugly caricatures are all but absent, except perhaps for a touch in some of Ovide's problems with Rita, or during his brief monastic experience. It may well be that Carle has been extremely well served by his collaboration with Roger Lemelin - by his being contained within the parameters of a very strong pre-existing story.

Not however, that the experience has proven nothing but beneficial. For one thing, the movie does not quite succeed in solving the fundamentally episodic nature of the novel. The promised television mini-series (six one-hour segments) may cope better with this, but none of the four (so far!) movie versions - with varying time lengths, dropped or added characters or events - have surmounted a basic structural problem. To oversimplify: is it a requirement for popular cinema to have tight, relatively simple plot-weaving around a limited number of key individuals, with ups and downs, climaxes, etc.? The novel went along its episodic way in great apparent freedom, hardly inhibited by such needs. Just how can the film be so literally true to its source and still be reduced to cinematic plot-weavings, relative tightness and simplicity?

Problem number two. Gilles Carle's

● Finally, a night at the Château Frontenac for Rita (Anne Létourneau) and Ovide (Gabriel Arcand)

