

Abitibi summers and winters

by Piers Handling

When Jean-Pierre Lefebvre talks about a cinema in this country that bears some relation to its economic base, he must surely be talking about films like André Blanchard's *L'hiver bleu* and *Beat*, as opposed to the multi-million dollar productions emanating from Toronto and Montreal. In fact, of all the Canadian films made in the last decade that speak directly to me, I think that the majority have been low-budget productions. The argument that this lack of money means a concurrent loss in production values is a specious one. However, it is a myth that production values immediately allow one access to the marketplace. *Beat* was made in 1975 and cost \$12,000. The more achieved and ambitious *L'hiver bleu*, shot in 1978, was made for \$80,000 and joins a list of illustrious predecessors made on similarly minute budgets: *Goin' Down the Road*, *The Only Thing You Know*, *Bar salon*, *The Hard Part Begins*, *Rejeanne Padovani*, *L'ange et la femme*, *Outrageous!*, and virtually all of Lefebvre's remarkable body of work.

The first thing one notices about *Beat*

and L'hiver bleu is the deeply-rooted regional base of the films. Set in the Abitibi region of Quebec, in the mining town of Rouyn-Noranda and its immediate environs, these films do not attempt to erase or deny their physical and psychological landscape. Quite the contrary is true; one feels a close communion between Blanchard, and the country and its people. Indeed he celebrates them. They are from Abitibi. Their problems are local, specific, identifiable, yet of course universal. This 'feel' that Blanchard has for his subject is evident in every short, every character, every situation.

Abitibi is a chronically depressed area, with many of its youth on welfare or unemployment; listless, they face a limited economic future in the region. This aimlessness is powerfully conveyed in *Beat*, a portrait of the drop-out society

in Rouyn-Noranda, centering on Yvon, a local pusher, and his coterie of friends and acquaintances. The boredom of Abitibi life seems inevitable. Rouyn is a small, isolated community providing few outlets to occupy the energies of its youth, beyond the local taverns and pool-halls. Yvon, despite the remonstrations of his parents, and a job-counsellor who wants to give him some self-respect, refuses to get a job, preferring instead to live a marginal existence, confined to the fringes of society along with most of his friends. His life is free of commitment even though he is living with his girlfriend Diane. The passion seems to have gone out of their relationship along with any spontaneous affection. She is as directionless as Yvon. Seen applying for welfare in the opening scenes of the film, she seems to have few expectations of life, making few demands and remaining coolly uninvolved. She is also very defensive, suspicious of outsiders, while possessively



● "The boredom of Abitibi life seems inevitable." Christiane (Lévesque) in *L'hiver bleu*

● The old wooden mining towers - once symbols of a dynamic, prosperous age; now, images of decay





● Passing time in the co-op house in Rouyn-Noranda. Michel (Chenier), Alice (Pomerleau) with her guitar, and Christiane (Lévesque) far right.

guarding Yvon from other women.

It is with the appearance of one of Yvon's old girlfriends that *Beat* begins to articulate its points. Jocelyne is an effective foil to Diane. Lively and vivacious, she seems a more suitable match for Yvon. She is an actress, touring the region with a local theatre troupe. Their theatre is communally oriented, and it attempts to interact with the local community. While Diane is somehow afraid of life and interaction — she is shown locking herself into their apartment on a number of occasions, actions that suggest the defensive nature of her personality — Jocelyne is the opposite, an extrovert with none of the fear that seems to pervade Diane's life. While Diane is shown to be essentially alone, Jocelyne enjoys the company of others, and works and lives with a group of people. While Diane wants to get away — she suggests a trip to Vancouver — Jocelyne is tied specifically to Abitibi.

Although he is not really aware of it, Yvon is confronted by a choice in these two women. Yvon is a complex person, obviously intelligent. Society has not managed to contain his energies. He dabbles with clay sculpture and once painted, but these interests have not held his interest. Having grown cynical from his experiences at college, he has decided to opt out in the easiest possible way. Pushing drugs keeps him alive, and uninvolved in a society that he inwardly despises. There is something of the child in him that refuses to grow up.

At one point Jocelyne mentions that he has lost the ideas and values that he once had. He feels betrayed because those ideas are worthless to him now, the adult world has proved more complex than he imagined. So he indulges in daydreaming about how he would spend a million dollars, or finds amusements in childish schemes to turn the smoke stacks of Rouyn into revolving restaurants for American tourists. Even though he has a momentary fling with Jocelyne, the end of the film shows him back with Diane, in a number of scenes that do not augur well for the future health of their relationship. This reconciliation has been prompted by what remains for me the most enigmatic part of the film. Pursuing Jocelyne, who has wandered off from a party with another woman, Yvon spies on the two of them

making love in the fields. Yvon cannot, it seems, deal with Jocelyne's bisexuality. His feelings of betrayal appear, however, to be partially mixed with envy. Nevertheless, his return to Diane is seen as limiting his potential for growth. Back at the party, Diane tells him that she is pregnant. This he can't deal with, and his anger is only subdued when he is overwhelmingly relieved to discover that it was only a joke meant to test his love. In the last shot of the film Yvon is back drinking in the taverns with his friends. Their rowdiness results in the arrival of the police and an ensuing scuffle. Diane is shown trying to restrain him. It is a moment of directionless anger, a meaningless gesture.

This final sequence speaks for the rest of the film. *Beat* ultimately remains a film of frustration and anger, apparently offering few alternatives. Escape is equated with Diane, and consequently has negative connotations. The drop-out attitude of indifference is epitomized by Yvon but he is shown as tragically trapped and incapable of real growth. Jocelyne remains the only character in the film who exhibits a potential for growth. Yet despite this I find Blanchard's attitude to her and the theatre group ambivalent. They (and she) have a vitality that stands in stark contrast to the layabouts in *Beat*, and particularly to Diane. Their exuberance is energizing and infectious, even Yvon is affected by it. They attempt to relate to the community, handing out flyers for their play in the street. But their theatre is abstract and narcissistic, convoluted and frivolous. It appears to have little value, and only a handful of people come to watch it. Blanchard's interrogation is perhaps indicative of the questions that were beginning to absorb him, including that of the place of his own art and role in Abitibi.

Similar questions inform *L'hiver bleu*, a more achieved and confident film in every respect than its predecessor. Blanchard's second film covers similar territory but in a far more complex and complete manner. While *Beat* is a film of the summer washed over by a sultry sun, *L'hiver bleu* opens on shots of a frozen landscape, swept by a howling cold wind. The contrast couldn't be more marked. Two young women, sisters, Christiane and Nicole, leave a communal farm for the local city of

film is invested with a visible sense of decay, yet balanced by a number of options that point forcefully to the future. Whatever is passive or static is seen as inhibiting, that which is active has a potential releasing force. Individual creations like Nicole's drawings, or Michel's pottery, are portrayed as having little contact with society (similar to Yvon's sculpting in *Beat*), while communal action, particularly the demonstration of the disabled workers, is positively defined as working for change. This is one major difference between the two films. While there is some ambivalence towards the theatre group in *Beat* and its communal function, this has disappeared in *L'hiver bleu*.

Blanchard uses powerful images of deterioration throughout *L'hiver bleu*, yet finally it is a film that has at its centre the birth, or re-birth of one of its characters. Christiane is placed in numerous situations that offer her alternative ways of dealing with Abitibi, or that conversely close doors to her during her voyage of discovery. This static, yet restless quality is continually held in counterpoint. The house in Rouyn provides the centre for her life, yet she is engaged on a search, and this is conveyed through travel. There are innumerable shots of the passing countryside interspersed throughout — the trip to Val d'Or, the journey back to her parents, the drive into college each day. That the film is indeed a symbolic journey is evident from the first sequence, when the two sisters set out on snowshoe for Rouyn, dragging their toboggan of belongings behind them.

Values of the past are disintegrating, with an equivalent sense of irrelevance surrounding them. The toppling of the old wooden mining tower, fallen into disuse, is a striking visual image of deterioration and decay. The economic order seems to be changing — these towers, once symbols of a dynamic, prosperous age have been abandoned and forgotten. Houses are for sale, snow covers the land, things are seemingly lifeless. Yet at the same time nothing has really changed: the modern smelting mills have simply replaced the old mining towers, and the dissonant electronic music Blanchard uses is associated with both the old and the new. The deception of apparent change, however, only reinforces a feeling of frustration that underlies much of *L'hiver bleu*.

Family ties are disintegrating as well. Nicole and Christiane, once inseparable, slowly drift apart, until they only meet

Rouyn-Noranda. Christiane wants to continue her studies at the local community college, while Nicole looks to make money so that she can travel. The film's dialectic is contained within these two characters: Christiane who goes back to school, lives out another communal experiment in Rouyn and becomes interested in political action; and Nicole, more self-centered, who gets a job, first as a waitress, then as a receptionist, leaves the cooperative house that she joined with her sister, and eventually departs for South America. Essentially the entire film — and the questions it raises — revolves around the two sisters, the choices they make and what these choices imply.

For Christiane, Rouyn is a way of re-involving herself in society; the struggle is just beginning for her as it was for Jocelyne in *Beat*. However, Nicole only wants to get away, to escape, much like Diane in the earlier film, and as if to reinforce the point Blanchard has the same actress play both roles. Rouyn opens doors for Christiane, yet Nicole cannot involve herself in its life. Finally, staying in Abitibi is seen as either offering the positive alternative of commitment, or its opposite — stagnation, boredom and frustration.

L'hiver bleu is a film about dislocation and degeneration on one level, and regeneration on the other. The entire

● "Working through the problems and questions of the Abitibi region." André Blanchard and Nicole Scant



in chance encounters – or, towards the end of the film, to say goodbye. But the most overwhelming evidence of fragmentation appears within the onemolothic, Québécois, Catholic family in a sequence portrayed with stunning economy – the wedding anniversary of the sister's parents. While the kindly, local curé presides at one end of the table mouthing traditional rhetoric about family stability, happiness and spiritual health, powerful tensions are at play between various members of the family. These tensions are given visual authority by placing Christiane and her father at one end of the table, with her mother and the curé at the other. Christiane, sitting beside her brother who works in a factory, also faces her older brother, a doctor, and his wife. The growing discomfort and animosity that pervades the meal somehow goes unnoticed by the curé, who is shown to have lost touch with what is happening. He is little more than a figurehead, the spokesperson of conventional values. The power and significance of the church has declined to the point where it is almost unrecognizable, a point that Blanchard makes by having him dressed in a jacket and tie, "unfrocked" so to speak.

Christiane's antagonism towards her married brother is tied closely to her growing awareness of the society around her. She feels that as a doctor he is guilty of exploiting people by charging high fees. She talks about the need for medicine in communal terms. He is more egotistical and selfish, in effect divorcing himself from the community. The values of the family, once hierarchical and unanimous, have crumbled into suspicion and confrontation. Despite this, the dinner does reveal the strong affection Christiane has for her father – a man who dreams of owning a piece of land with no fences around it. "Why can't we be like the young?" he asks. However, this filial affection is somehow transitory and elusive. Their relationship is marked by an inescapable loneliness, a feeling which Blanchard reinforces when he rapidly intercuts a flashback of them embracing, into Christiane returning, alone, to her house in Rouyn. Other moments of warmth and contact are tinged with sadness, reflection and separation. Gain is balanced with loss.

If Nicole is shown throughout the film as withdrawing into herself, enclosing and limiting her choices, Christiane develops in the opposite way. She involves herself and begins to define her life. Growing away from her family she instead looks for her collective experience in the co-op house she shares. Ultimately it does not provide her with any answers, but it is an important waystation. It brings her into contact with people and ideas. With Michel she travels to Val d'Or to join a picketline for a day. This also marks the first tentative step of her politicization.

Throughout *L'hiver bleu*, Blanchard intercuts scenes of a group of irate workers from the Federation of Disabled Workers demonstrating outside government offices responsible for industrial accident claims. At first these moments disorient us and appear to have no connection to Christiane's and Nicole's story. They lack a context, showing another world, a separate reality. Yet they have a tremendous importance that is slowly revealed to us. The leader of this clamorous group is shown as dealing with real problems, indigenous to the area – compensation for injured

workers stricken by silicosis or asbestosis. His demands are specific, concrete and community-oriented. While hitch-hiking back to their parents' anniversary celebrations, the two sisters are picked up by a local businessman, a building contractor, who first extols the virtues of his huge American car, before making sexual advances towards Nicole. While of the same background and age as the union leader, he is shown as selfish and myopic. He is totally regionally centered, which leads him to assert that "the bosses should come from here, they're better than the English bosses." Christiane sees through his shallow self-interest and condemns this idea as merely replacing one kind of exploitation with another. In some basic way, the attitudes and actions of these two very different men act as a reflection of what separates Nicole and Christiane. These opposing 'realities' recur frequently throughout *L'hiver bleu*. During one scene two sturdy, but elderly, women join the demonstration to lead in the singing of an old union song which admonishes the workers to fight for their rights. The mention of silicosis and asbestosis situates the specificity of their song. Placed next to this is another song, performed by a local group of bar musicians. It is a typical, vacuous love song. The lyrics are aimless. The scene is shot so that it separates the people singing the song. The audience is not shown, the singers face away from the camera. The union song is presented exactly the opposite way. It brings people together, it unites the group, it is socially motivated, they sing to the camera, to us as an audience.

Towards the end of the film, Christiane is presented with a series of choices, which we feel will affect the future course of her life. She listens with great care, first to a student discussion of politics. She meets Lise, thoughtful and politically committed, and they strike up a friendship. The two of them meet Alice, a woman who has hitherto just been visible on the periphery of the film. (In an earlier scene she has bizarrely adorned a girl with make-up. There is a vague, narcissistic tone to their conversation about Montreal, a sense of escapism in their attitude.) Alice is an actress, only emotions are important for her. She justifies the bar-life that she

lives as providing emotional contact. Lise and Alice argue two diametrically opposed positions, one rational and intellectual, the other emotional and subjective. It is the strength of *L'hiver bleu*, that neither of these positions become 'prescriptive in Blanchard's hands.

Christiane senses however, that her destiny lies with Lise, who begins to introduce her to the history of the area, the mine and its origins. She talks in general terms, relating Abitibi to the world outside. Near the film's conclusion they walk by the industrial accidents office, where the workers have been picketing, and try to get in the building. A policeman bars their way. They peer in through the windows, excluded from events happening inside, yet curious about what is going on nevertheless. This scene encapsulates the film. The two realities are on the verge of connecting. Christiane is not yet an active participant in the struggle but we feel that her curiosity will lead her in this direction.

That Christiane has indeed resolved something in her life is confirmed by the final section of the film. Nicole has by now finally left for South America. She has made her escape. Michel asks Christiane to join him in the Gaspé for the summer, another form of flight. Michel has also been shown as dislocated in a way, listless and uninvolved although teaching at the local college. But his teaching is not connected to anything. (Indeed, a general boredom and irrelevance pervades all the classroom scenes shown in the film.) But Christiane declines, she has found a job for the summer in Rouyn. She has moved in with Lise, dropped out of college. This is where she belongs. Michel leaves, the screen belongs to her. She selects a song from the jukebox which expresses not just what she is thinking but Blanchard's feelings as well. It talks of things you cannot change – snow in January, forest fires in spring, the wind on the St. Lawrence – but it also asks why things are the way they are: "Sometimes I wonder why some have it and others don't – CHANGE IT!"

While *Beat* ends in a frustrated, directionless anger, *L'hiver bleu* suggests a quiet, yet deep, resolve to stay and make things work. More importantly, the em-

phasis has shifted from the cynicism of Yvon to the idealistic dreamer that is Christiane. In *Beat* Yvon accuses Joice, lyne, another dreamer, of not being able to face life. In *L'hiver bleu*, it is Christiane who faces life, while Yvon's counterpart in this film, Michel, is the one who wants to leave. This reversal is not as schematic as I suggest here, but it does represent a significant reformulation of the basic theme in Blanchard's two films. Indeed he is working through problems and questions of the Abitibi region with great care. Both *Beat* and *L'hiver bleu* depict everyday events and deal with people who are gradually moving towards some kind of definition in their lives. They take small steps. Blanchard suggests that this is fundamental for change of any sort. ●

BEAT d./sc. André Blanchard camera Alain Dupras sd. Robert Girard ed. Francis Van Den Hurvel mus. Maurice Comtois, Rick Nault, Gilles Cote, Michel Jete, Vianny Miljsour, Claude Vendette, Guy Piche, Georges Borowitzky, Jean Racine, Danilo Levi, Louise Girard, Michel Blais, Gilles Paquette, Laurier Blais, le groupe Abitibi b.p. asst. Ghislaine Camirand, Louise Laferte, Daniel Laurendeau, Denise Levesque, Jacques Marcotte, Jean Racine, Madeleine Ste-Marie neg. cut. Gilbert Ferron mix. Gilbert Ferron special asst. Daniel Jobin (final print), Antonine Maes (asst. ed.), Gilles Prince (titles), Claude Langlois (N.F.B.), Gilles Quintal (N.F.B.) sp. efx. Les Films Truca Inc. l.p. Bertrand Gagnon, Nicole Scant, Dominique Ayotte, Daniel Laurendeau, Gilles Deschatelets, Richard Fortier, Alice Pomerleau, Réjean Roy, Micheline Sauvé, Jean-Pierre Scant, Pierre Olscamp, Destination Masters, Les Hordes de Montbrun, Monsters of the Road, Antoinette, Rejeanne Asselin, Gérard Baril, Pierre Brouillette, André Cyr, Roger Fortier, Daniel Gosselin, Ginette Grodine, Sylvie Helbert, Rita Lapointe, Bertrand Larouche, Pierre Lord, Gaetan Lockhead, Richard Menard, Marc Mercier, Mario Parent, Michel Pronovost, Jacques Racine, Alain Rheault, Claude St-Pierre, Pierre Trudel col. 16mm (1975) running time 65 min. dist. Les Films du Crépuscule Inc.

L'HIVER BLEU d. André Blanchard p. Marguerite Duparc p. man. Louis Dallaire p. sec. Claudine Fauque sc. André Blanchard, Jeanne-Mance Delisle a.d. Camille Belhumeur d.o.p. Alain Dupras. Madeleine Ste-Marie, Jacques Marcotte sd. Robert Girard ed. Francis Van Den Heuvel, Ginette Leduc cont. Louise Laferte unitman Luc Quesnel, Andree Barrette stills François Rupp l.p. Christiane Levesque, Nicole Scant, Michel Chénier, Roland Pelletier, Claire Nault, Léo Cantin, Réjean Roy, Alice Pomerleau, and others... p.c. Cinak Ltée col. 16mm running time 84 min. dist. Les Films du Crépuscule Inc. prizes: Le prix de la critique 1980 from L'Association québécoise des critiques de cinéma, and Le Ducat D'Or 1979, Festival du film de Mannheim, West-Germany.

● "This clamorous group is shown as dealing with real problems indigenous to the area – workers stricken by silicosis or asbestosis."

