

## Claude Jutra's **Surfacing**

As I sat down to write this review, I noticed in the paper that producer Beryl Fox had written a letter in response to Ron Base's devastating review of the film printed in the *Toronto Star*. Base's critique of *Surfacing* was, in fact, reckless and abusive – abusive in its generalized derision of the film's "feminist prudishness" and reckless as a film review. If we are striving to develop some sort of serious national cinema, it must go hand in hand with serious (and to use Base's word, "committed") criticism and discussion.

First, it is not, as Base headlines, "Atwood's Introspective *Surfacing*" that may be "sinking with all hands" (as the argument goes). It is Claude Jutra's film. Films are not novels and should not be expected to duplicate a totally different medium. As Jutra said in an interview, "There's no doubt that it became something different from the book. It was a detour we had to take."

Beryl Fox suggests in her piece that "male chauvinists" like Base will never "understand a movie with a strong female lead," and ends by suggesting that women (and sensitive, aware men) should decide the film's worth.

What, then, is *Surfacing* about? What does the film communicate about women, and what is the struggle it is trying to define? It will disappoint audiences expecting a wilderness drama about a woman out to find or rescue her father. The film doesn't work on his literal level and Jutra suggests this from the opening image: a woman is seen, in long-shot, diving off the side of a canoe into the depths of a lake and then resurfacing. At first, this shot has no "logical" connection to the opening one of Kate – again in long-shot – seen riding through the streets of a city en route to inform her boyfriend of her missing father. The logic, however, becomes clear as the film progresses: water has always served as a symbol of female sexuality. The search is not for Kate's father, but for herself – her identity as an independent woman. Her dependence is clear from the following sequence of Kate with her boyfriend. It is Joe who decides what Kate must do. But Kate is terrified of confronting her father because, as she explains, she has "no good news"; she is neither a "doctor" nor a "lawyer," and she "doesn't have six kids!" (Two possible ways a woman can find respectability and success are to prove herself in a male-approved profession, or get married and bear children.)

*Surfacing* is about women's roles in a patriarchal society; a society exemplified in the extreme by the character of David. It attempts to investigate the victimization of women, the objectification of women as sexual images for male pleasure and the ensuing violence that erupts from these relationships. Although the questions posed are important and valid, the film is not entirely satisfactory. And I don't think, as Beryl Fox implies, that the 'challenging' nature of the issues is fully to blame for the film's widespread rejection.

*Surfacing* is structured as a 'descent' or journey film. The journey works on the classic premise that the farther away one gets from 'civilization' the closer one gets to exposing the true

nature of one's identity, one's 'survivalist' self. As the search and attempt to uncover 'father' gets closer, the film gets increasingly violent.

The characters on this journey are set up in almost stereotypical opposition. Anna is presented as the extreme of the victimized woman. Her relationship with David survives on her masochism and his abusive ability to humiliate her. Her identity depends upon the outward presentation of herself as an object of male sexual desire. She is, generally, hysterical and out of control. David is presented as the hunter – he dominates Anna for the same reason that the hunters kill herons and moose. Both rule by the gun as an emblem of power (against the fear of castration or loss of that power). Both David's guns and the movie camera with which he shoots degrading images of Anna dancing around a strung-up decaying carcass of a heron are phallus substitutes.

In opposition to Anna, Kate represents the extreme of the potentially liberated woman: earthy-pretty (needing no artifice), can match any jock at surviving in the wilderness, remains unperturbed through most disasters and emergencies (even after her lover might be dead after falling off a cliff), and is endowed with a very sexual Playboy-centrefold body. One begins to wonder whether this image of potential female liberation is one created by male fantasy. (Whether or not this is Atwood's view is immaterial – it is still one propagated by a male-thinking culture.) She is a woman whose worth is measured by her ability to match a man's capabilities outdoors, and play out the roles of woman-as-nurse (in the leech sequence) and mother (the extraordinary breasts).

In the scene where Joe begins to undress Kate to make love to her, there is an interesting tension created between the uncovering of a female body for the pleasure of the audience – the kind of thing that the cinema has long habituated us with – and Kate's impulse to cover up.

Joe is a rather nondescript, amorphous combination of 'sensitivity' and 'manliness.' For the most part he supports Kate, yet at times feels defensive of David. During the heron/dance sequence for example, he tells her, "If you don't approve (of David's ravaging Anna) then don't watch."

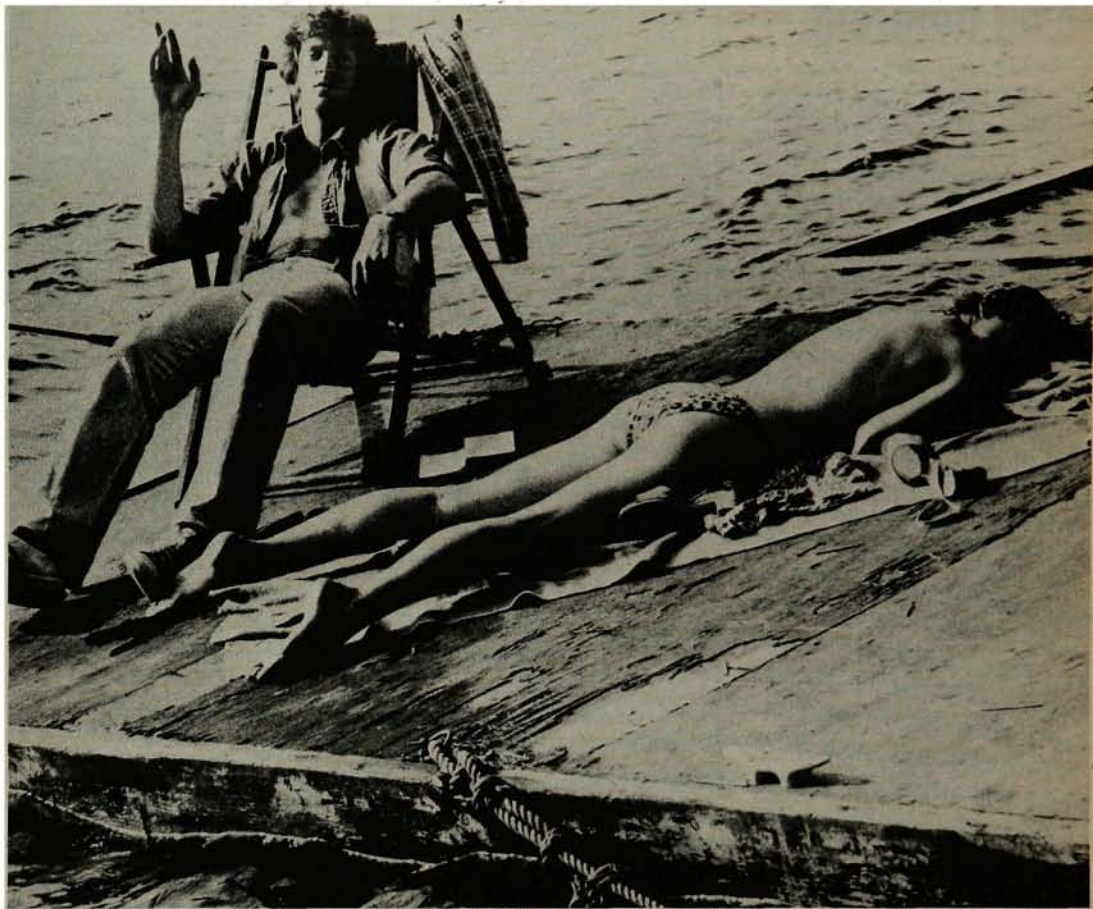
Jutra has made it clear in interviews that he inherited Kathleen Beller and Joseph Bottoms, and Bernard Gordon's script. The three handicaps are insurmountable – even for an experienced director like Jutra. Beller is too young and unable to cope with the complexities of her character – she ends up speechless and bewildered through much of the film. Bottoms matches her inability to give the character any depth. R.H. Thompson and Margaret Dragu on the other hand do succeed in giving their characters a much greater complexity than the script allows them. The script tosses out major issues that desperately need development, such as Kate's pregnancy and subsequent abortion, and the implications of her father in all this, or the domination of big business over environment and art.

The film doesn't survive the contradiction it sets up: when Kate is finally free of the guilt and burden of the 'father,' she soaps herself in the lake, while Ann Mortifee's "Gypsy Girl" on the soundtrack makes one cringe. Along with the painful voiceover and trite use of "freedom-heron" imagery, she

then rejoins Joe after her speech about independence. The entire ending gives one the feeling that the heroine's resurfacing is a rushed event in desperate need of further, more careful development.

*Surfacing* does attempt to raise some crucial issues about women within contemporary culture. Richard Leiterman's camera almost compensates visually for Kathleen Beller's inabilities by capturing the turbulence of the lake, and the intense beauty of the wilderness through sensual images that beg to be touched. If *Surfacing* is not wholly successful, it is nonetheless refreshing to see a film which has the integrity to approach these issues within a Canadian context.

Florence Jacobowitz ●



● A quiet afternoon of sunbathing turns into a fearful ordeal. R.H. Thompson and Margaret Dragu

**SURFACING** d. Claude Jutra sc. Bernard Gordon, based on the novel by Margaret Atwood p. Beryl Fox assoc. p. Michael Zolf exec. p. Bram Appel, Del Anderson co-p. Doug Leiterman, Philip F. Hobel d.o.p. Richard Leiterman a.d. Rick Thompson (1st), Don Brough (2nd), Rocco Gismondi, Keith Locke (3rd) cam. op. Nick Brook canoe expert Bob Morgan, King Baker sp. ph. efx Arne Boye underwater consult. "Big John" McLaughlin asst. cam. Jock Martin (1st), Paul Randle (2nd) ed. Toni Myers superv. ed. Danford B. Greene, a.c.e. asst. ed. Catherine Leiterman sd. mix Christian Wangler gaffer Malcolm Kendal key grip Andy Mulkani grip Robert McRae elec. Gary Deneault boom Randy Milligan art d. Bill Beeton set dec. Bill Reid cont. Pattie Robertson props Doug Tiller stunts Gordy Huxtable, Catherine Leiterman, Bob Vince, Julia Leiterman driver capt. Larry Sullivan drivers Gordy Huxtable, Bob Vince craft serv. Julia Leiterman cost. Ann-Marie Tree Newton make-up Bill Morgan gen. op. Herbert Geisch loc. man. Roberta Kip pub. Edie Yolles p. man. Robert Linnell p. sec. Gabrielle Clery casting Claire Walker, Janine Manatis lp. Joseph Bottoms, Kathleen Beller, R.H. Thompson, Margaret Dragu p.c. Surfacing Film Productions Inc. (1979) running time 88:45 min. dist. Pan-Canadian