

## The disturbing dialectic of Anne-Claire Poirier

by Francine Prévost

Anne-Claire Poirier's films are disturbing – and *La Quarantaine* is no exception. Always different, her films have never been what the public expected. At a time when the National Film Board was the midst of *cinéma direct*, Anne-Claire Poirier made a fiction film, *La fin des étés* (1964), styling herself after her favorite filmmakers – Agnès Varda, François Truffaut and Alain Resnais – for whom cinema also meant fiction. A few years later, when her peers were engrossed in social or political problems, Anne-Claire spoke for subjectivity, the feminine "I" in her first feature, *De mère en fille* (1968). And in the early '70s, while the team of the "En tant que femme" series were articulating women, Anne-Claire made *Les Filles du Roy* (1973), a long poem dedicated to the rehabilitation of "our faded heroines, women stripped of all dimension in our history books." Anne-Claire Poirier's cinematic work has always stood outside expectations and trends.

Her films surprise – either expressing



● Speaking for the subjectivity of the feminine "I"

● The "En tant que femmes" team: Jeanne Morazin, Hélène Girard, Anne-Claire's mother, Anne-Claire Poirier and Marthe Blackburn



too much or too little. Often criticized for her filmic handling of real problems, Anne-Claire has neither wanted to present problems nor give easy answers. Whether it is the question of abortion she is addressing as in *Le temps de l'avant* (1975) or rape as in *Mourir à tue-tête* (1979), the important thing to her has been to remain in touch with her own feelings, offering us her perceptions with all their excesses and shortcomings, though without insisting that her perception be the only right one.

To be able to provide some understanding of her latest film, – it is not enough to compare *La Quarantaine* to *Mourir à tue-tête*. *La Quarantaine* appears 20 years after Anne-Claire took her first steps as a filmmaker, when she worked as an editor on Clément Perron's film *Jour après jour*. She has grown since. Yet is it not the fact she is a woman that keeps the public from considering her work as a whole? When Monique Mercure as "la grosse Louise" asks the spectator whether women in their forties are at their peak and, if so, what does their success consist of, it is really a question Anne-Claire is asking herself. For she is not all that sure that women's work is at a peak. And yet, Poirier, who began at the Board in 1960, and made her first short film *30 Minutes, Mister Plummer* in 1962, is one of the

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pioneers of Quebec cinema – just like Pierre Patry, Gilles Groulx and others. So there is no reason why we should ignore the vital concerns that have given shape to her cinematic creation.

The relationship between art and reality early on became an important question in Poirier's work. Anne-Claire's beginnings at the NFB coincided with the candid eye movement at the Board; a movement that clashed with her passionate interest in the theatre, an art form less conducive to illusion than the cinema. Anne-Claire was never taken in by the distance the camera creates between reality and truth. She was always aware that the truth captured by the camera is never that of reality but that of artistic creation. At the beginning of her career as filmmaker, the documentary *30 Minutes, Mister Plummer* and the fiction film *La fin des étés* gave in to the division of genres. But since *De mère en fille* she has developed a cinematic style where the mixing of genres destroys the illusion of reality and allows a felt truth to flow through the eye of the camera.

The films of Anne-Claire Poirier do not have a marked linear structure. They are edited so as to create tension; a tension that forces the spectator to engage with what he sees on the screen. Be it *De mère en fille*, *Les Filles du Roy* or *Mourir à tue-tête*, each work is like a mosaic where separate pieces of different tones harmonize to create contrasts of different intensity. *Cinéma direct*, fiction, illusion, criss-cross and intermingle creating rupture and depth, lack and excess. Added to the mix of visual styles is an equally complex soundtrack with interviews, voice over, monologue and dialogue between characters. Poetic and mundane, they jostle together, leaving the spectator perplexed.

Anne-Claire Poirier's films are not linear: *La Quarantaine* is no less dialectical than her other films, although the dialectic may be working in a different way. The many flashbacks, the rapid cutting of action-packed scenes (like all games and songs) alternating with the slow pace of deliberative scenes (like the reading of letters, or "la grosse Louise" hesitating before she discovers the dead Tarzan); the abundance of close-ups, the always mobile camera, create a pace that troubles.

As a matter of fact Poirier's films do not tell what we call "a good story" – with her films it is always what we least expect. If she is fond of a non-narrative cinematic style, it is because this style fits her own vision best. Anecdotes are not what inspire her: they are the pretext she uses to set free what she has to say. The rape in *Mourir à tue-tête* was a reason to speak about rape in general. Poirier asked herself how it is possible that a man who is capable of having a love relationship with a woman, can also have a hate relationship that destroys the woman and leaves him triumphant. The perspective widens upon reflection: rape becomes all sexual appropriation and domination of woman's body by patriarchal society. In *La Quarantaine* a similar thing happens. It is not a matter of telling personal stories but to expose, albeit subjectively, fundamental problems faced by people in the middle of their lives. From reflections on the family, love, faithfulness, homosexuality, the central question remains how the adult relates to his childhood. Are we not still the children we were, and is adulthood not a fiction of our imagination? Anger, aggression, tenderness, the need to love and be

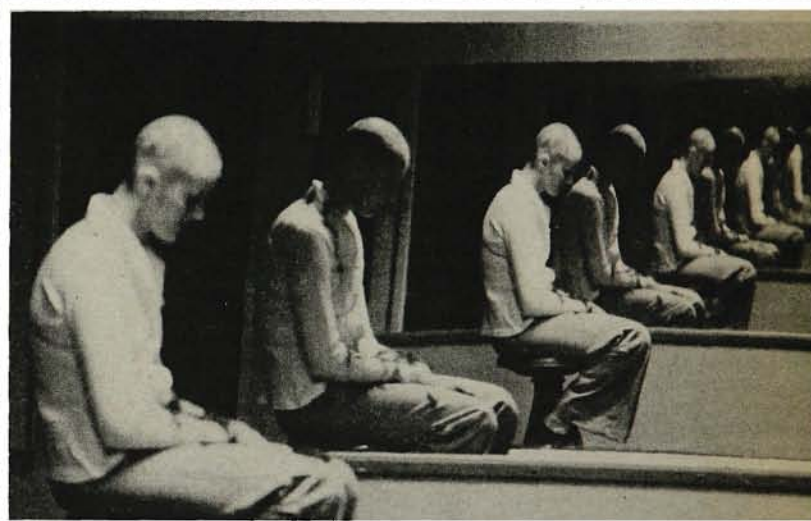
loved – are they different feelings when we feel them as adults?

The themes Poirier deals with never turn into dissertations. No matter what one might say about her didacticism, it always remains close to her emotions. Whether it is the long dialogue between the two women in *Le temps de l'avant* or the imaginary trial in *Mourir à tue-tête*, it is always through emotion that thought materializes and this emotion emerges through the body. The body is not a theme in Poirier's films; it is living, palpable matter. Anne-Claire's interest in the theatre not only allowed her to distance herself from a cinematic style that pretends to portray reality, but it inspired her, right from the start, with the desire to explore the presence and movement of bodies before the eye of the camera. When she filmed Christopher Plummer in the role of Macbeth at Stratford in 1962, she wanted to show "the hallucinating transformation that the 33-year-old actor undergoes when, in a period of three hours, he changes from triumphant youth to the most tragic agony." Be it the metamorphosis of Christopher Plummer or the "receptacle" body of Liette Desjardins in *De mère en fille* or the mummified body of Danielle Ouimet in *Les Filles du Roy* or again the raped bodies in *Mourir à tue-tête*, their presence is always something that feels extreme to the spectator.

Of all her work it is in *La Quarantaine* that Poirier's fascination with the body is most evident. The cinema has accustomed us to restrained emotion, to discreet bodies, or to decidedly erotic or aggressive ones; therefore the public feels uneasy with the body that cries and laughs if the camera accentuates its presence with close-ups. Yet this is what Poirier does in *La Quarantaine*, even more consciously, and more provocatively so than in all her other films. Bodies touch, hug, and cling out of the usual context of love scenes, with a kind of provocation that brings to mind the innocence of a child. These bodies are fully dressed, but they reveal a new kind of nudity, a less expected one. They expose themselves to us, without shame, wide-open, mouths laughing and crying with gestures of abandonment. Nothing is held back; they hang on to one another, dancing, whirling, alone, in groups, man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, outside the traditional couple. The rule of acting that imposes restraint on the actor since the camera amplifies every gesture is not respected here at all. Poirier has defied it, tempted as she was to invent a new gestural expression, a new kind of indecency. The characters in *La Quarantaine* seem to be above all bodies, bodies that move about before the eye of the camera, in a restricted space that brings to mind the space of the theatre.

In all of her films, aside from her two short ones where the presence of men was important, Poirier has given body and speech above all to women. The male characters were always discreet – or outright negative like the rapist in *Mourir à tue-tête*. In her latest film the space of the male does not rival that of women. In *La Quarantaine* this side-by-side presence of men and women that do not form couples is the result of an evolution, a gaining of consciousness that Anne-Claire undergoes parallel to her search for a new form and aesthetic.

Her beginnings as a filmmaker at the NFB took place in a world almost exclusively reserved to men. Her films *30 Minutes, Mister Plummer* and *La fin*



● Scenes from *Mourir à tue-tête*: Extremism in the eye of the spectator

*des étés* were attempts to prove that she, too, could learn the profession of filmmaker. However, when she became pregnant she saw her chances for success diminish. She realized that fatherhood did not change the professional life of any man, but that motherhood, on the other hand, could jeopardize her future at the Board. Luckily, she used her new experience as the springboard for *De mère en fille*, the first feature made by a woman in Quebec. A few years before the blossoming of the feminist movement in Quebec, Poirier expressed herself in her films with a

feminine "I" that some women then called "a narcissistic outburst." Admittedly her words did not have a very strong political or sociological dimension, but were the expression of a category of women caught trying to combine motherhood with a professional career.

That film did achieve a certain success when it was shown on TV in the fall of 1968, in spite of the fact that it was recommended for adult viewing. This first work of Anne-Claire's, where she expressed herself as woman, was followed by two others within the framework of the "En tant que femme" series.



● No happy days when the gang gets together in *La Quarantaine*

Anne-Claire Poirier's  
**La Quarantaine**

The trauma of mid-life has won star billing in a number of motion pictures, and with widely-varying results; Paul Mazursky, for example, virtually smart-assed the subject to death in his recent *Tempest*. Glib sarcasm is not part of Anne-Claire Poirier's arsenal in *La Quarantaine* (The Forties), and neither is the gentle, almost sitcom-flavoured humour of Alan Alda's *The Four Seasons*, to which her new film bears a stronger sentimental resemblance. But that absence of 'comic relief' is not a saving grace. This National Film Board produced chronicle of the reunion of ten childhood friends after a thirty-year separation is slow-paced and sad and structurally peculiar: despite its intimate setting and stylistic modesty, the whole movie plays like overblown theatre.

*La Quarantaine's* big draw is its cast, as illustrious a group as you'd care to see in one picture, and featuring some of Quebec's leading theatrical lights. But the actors are operating within the confines of an uninspired screenplay, where character composites almost seem drawn out of a hat.

What happens when a 46-year-old lawyer (Roger Blay) decides to assemble the members of his adolescent gang for a one-night get-together? He finds them older, somewhat mellower, and almost painfully representative of a social cross-section. We've got an actress (Luce Guilbeault), a psychiatrist (Pierre Thériault), a happily-married mother of five (Louise Remy), a civil servant (Pierre Gobeil), a bittersweet divorcée (Patricia Nolin), and a somewhat weary mistress of a married man (Michele Rossignol). The lawyer's old girlfriend (Monique Mercure) has become a journalist, as vociferous and passionate as ever, and a quiet, almost pretty, male member of the pack (Benoit Girard) has both blossomed into an architect and come out of the closet. The only dissonant notes are sounded by the absence of an alcoholic doctor now practicing in Cambodia (Aubert Pallas-

ciol, and by a successful businessman nicknamed "Tarzan" (Jacques Godin), who cannot reconcile himself to this momentary trip back into happier memories. "La Gang" meets on the steps of a church in its home town, and then sequesters itself in a country cabin for a night of reminiscences and revelations.

The staginess of the film isn't helped by its rhythm, which pushes the group from one set piece to another—singing old songs, playing old games, and watching home movies. And everything's delivered at fever pitch, as though the troupe is playing to the very back row. There's no real dramatic penetration of the characters, probably due to that theatrical distancing; through the haze of Michel Brault's nostalgically amber images, we're watching these people without getting inside their skins. That works against the basic premise of a picture like *La Quarantaine*, and effectively does it in.

Middle age and the crisis of reflection that comes with it remain provocative, emotional topics, despite their mistreatment at the hands of lesser filmmakers. Anne-Claire Poirier has demonstrated a penchant for taking cinematic risks, and for a degree of melodrama, both attested to by the controversial and uneven *Mourir à tue-tête*. She's moved back onto more traditional ground here, and taken only the melodrama with her: *La Quarantaine* ends with a badly-handled suicide that just leaves you feeling uncomfortable. It's a cleaner but less ambitious package than her essay on rape, and that's only partly due to the subject matter. If she'd carried some of that daring into her exploration of character and situation here, she would have made a markedly better movie.

Anne Reiter ●

**LA QUARANTAINE** d. Anne-Claire Poirier sc. Marthe Blackburn, Poirier d.o.p. Michel Brault unit man. Michel Dandavino cont. Monique Champagne a.d. Mireille Goulet asst. cam. Serge Lafortune 2nd asst. cam. Michel Motard sd. Richard Besse boom Esther Auger gaffer Guy Rémillard key grip Jean Trudeau art d. Denis Boucher props Charles Bernier cost. Huguette Gagne make-up Brigitte McCaughy exec. p. Laurence Paré p. Jacques Vallé mus. Joel Bienvenue ed. André Corriveau l.p. Roger Blay, Monique Mercure, Jacques Godin, Patricia Nolin, Pierre Thériault, Luce Guilbeault, Benoit Girard, Aubert Pallascio, Michele Rossignol, Louise Remy, Pierre Gobeil p.c. National Film Board of Canada, colour 16mm, running time 100 min.

Now, Anne-Claire was no longer alone with her questions; a group of women surrounded her and worked with her. They too wanted to become filmmakers. For them, women's liberation will come from "a radical reform of attitudes and mentalities, from the overthrowing of a sexist régime and all other régimes founded on violence and domination." While never a militant feminist, Anne-Claire will always be conscious of the need to speak as a woman and not to deny her womanhood in her art.

With *La Quarantaine* Poirier has reached another stage in her reflections on male/female relations. How do they each assess their lives? Have men of power like Tarzan (Jacques Godin) achieved something? Tarzan says to Louise: "I have lived in a world of crazies. I was afraid that I would not succeed... when I look at myself in the mirror I see nobody." A few hours later he kills himself. The women live in a world of crazies as well but their strength is greater than that of men. This observation reappears like a leitmotiv in all of Poirier's work—with the exception of *Mourir à tue-tête* and there she was criticized for not showing women a way out of the rape situation that lead her character to suicide.

Anne-Claire's commitment to life, awareness and emotion is possibly what disturbs us most in *La Quarantaine*. Tarzan's despair does not quite reach us because the whole film is centered around a woman, brought to life by Monique Mercure, who will not allow destructive forces to survive. She is not affected by Tarzan; she is there to comfort him. She is too wholly positive, with neither weaknesses nor failings—even though she states her regret at always having dispensed comfort, yet never having received it. Tarzan's grief

touches her like a mother who is used to comforting, but not like a person who has known the battle between life and death from experience. When Tarzan says to King: "You are capable of playing at pretending" the words find an echo in the spectator's own feelings. But not for a moment does one feel that Poirier is touched by Tarzan's statement. Wanting to show that the adult is still the child he was, and by choosing a happy, alive, sensitive woman as the central character, Anne-Claire Poirier has stepped into the trap of the happy-childhood myth. The possibility that childhood could have consisted of suffering is totally left out. Yet it is impossible to have nothing but happy memories; why then this insistence to show only that, when Tarzan's suicide opens a new perspective? We get the impression that Louise has been tricked and so have we, as spectators invited by her to this party. Tarzan is right when he says that the whole party is fake. Something very important has been hidden from us.

It is the other, the *not said*, that is present throughout the film and misleads us. What we suspect of the daily life of these characters is not developed enough to make us believe in the party, their joy at seeing one another again, or Tarzan's suicide. But maybe we expect too much of a story when we watch *La Quarantaine*, feeling that something precise has been left out. And perhaps Anne-Claire Poirier's only mistake was to abandon herself to the pleasure she took in those bodies, in the game of moving in and out of past and present, from childhood to adulthood. It is a party for the camera; no doubt about that. And that is why it is the play of bodies in motion that pleases and amazes the most.

● Poirier makes a commitment to life and emotion

