



Through a stranger's eyes Gilles Carle and the image of Quebec

by Richard Martineau

Gilles Carle has mentioned his uneasiness about adapting novels, his balancing act between respect for a novel and a desire to go further. *Maria Chapdelaine* suffers from this indecisiveness from beginning to end. Like a lot of his other

Richard Martineau writes for a number of Quebec film publications.

films, to tell the truth. For example, he sets up the elements of a certain political and social criticism in *La mort d'un bûcheron* without really taking his ideological commitment all the way. Or, in *Fantastica*, he traces a certain parallel between theatre and life without ever expressing it fully. Or he connects chess to international politics in *The Great Chess Movie*, without ever going beyond simple assertion. It almost seems that with Gilles Carle there's a gulf between

conception and act, between idea and result that he can't cross. It's as if Gilles Carle has never been willing to follow his choices to their final consequences. I think that only *Les Plouffe* comes off all right in this respect, along with *La vraie nature de Bernadette*, his best film to date. However, the novel of *Les Plouffe* didn't pose the same problem in its adaptation: the situations and the treatment were clear and the characters well enough developed to be interesting

and, what is more, the original author was there to participate in the screenwriting.

If *Maria Chapdelaine* ultimately fails as a psychological film, never living up to its ambitions, it's the same failure as in its reconstruction of traditional Quebec folkways. There also, Carle is torn between Hemon's vision of our customs and a need for authenticity. In this regard, and other critics have noticed this, several details are confusing: for

example, the consumption of maple syrup in a region that doesn't have any, or the unprecedented appearance of a deer in Peribonka. Although an effort was made to recreate the Lac St-Jean region in 1910 more or less credibly, at many points it just doesn't work. The characters are so unbelievable in themselves that the historical reconstruction seems all the more suspect, all the more mannered. As for the atmosphere, let's just say that it only rarely rises above the most simplistic level. The beautiful exteriors and the often slick cinematography together create a clichéd romanticism. And the waterfalls and other 'sexual' symbols seem more like awkward attempts to link the characters at any price to the landscape than truly suggestive imagery. This veneer of Freudian symbols tacked on to Maria's story is reminiscent of *La tête de Normande St-Onge*, where every sequence was crammed with little corners in which Carle tucked away all too many such symbols. And it's done in a rhythm and in a manner so mechanical that these symbols freeze up and, from contributing to an atmosphere, bring to the surface all its artifice and phoniness. Here also, there's a big gap between the creative concept and the final product.

Even though sympathetic, the look Hémon cast on the Québécois and their culture was also quite condescending. The Québécois are depicted as naive; simple, if not simplistic; and obliged, because of their lack of culture and education, to turn to their priests for counsel. Their traditions, their leisure activities, their religious fervor were seen and described by Hémon with a certain distance, as if he was a father describing the innocent activities of his children. What he describes is often right. It is the way he does it that is so offensive. But the Québécois were not fooled. They rejected the book as soon as it appeared. It was only later, when Hémon's novel was acclaimed around the world, that *Maria Chapdelaine* gained their admiration. If people from other countries greatly admired the novel, didn't it merit the same reaction from us?

Politically, Carle has always preferred a cinema of observation to a cinema that is, if not militant, at least clearly oriented. In other words, his films present a certain socio-political situation that Carle chooses to observe and rarely bothers to analyse. His films merely present, but don't go any farther. The spectator must draw his own conclusions because none are imposed upon him. Carle's films reject demonstration and so do not raise the consciousness of the average viewer. It is because of this that his most politically oriented film is *La vraie nature de Bernadette*, in which he supports collective action and rejects individual idealists. In the latter film, the filmmaker speaks out while in most of his other films, neither the characters nor the director seem conscious of the situation which is being treated.

It is fruitless to go on with the debate between these opposing visions of what cinema should accomplish. Carle's attitude, based on a respect for the viewer and a desire to transpose reality in all its complexity and ambiguity is a comprehensible one. Not every filmmaker likes a didactic approach. The problem, however, arises when a filmmaker continues along these lines when adapting a novel that has very strong political overtones. In such a case, this stubborn attitude takes on another dimension.

That's what's wrong with *Maria Chap-*

delaine. In the novel, Louis Hémon did not merely present anecdotes or sentimental dramas experienced by Maria. Written by a Frenchman while in Québec and first published in Canada in 1916, *Maria Chapdelaine* contributed greatly to the sense of cultural alienation experienced by the Québécois. Once again, they were defined by a foreigner. But this time, for the whole world, because the novel was translated into 18 languages and published in 25 countries. The after-effects of *Maria Chapdelaine* have not been easily dissipated. For a long time and still today, there kept reappearing a vague desire by Québécois to evaluate themselves in the light of foreign criteria and to be reassured by France on the validity of their culture. Thus, a certain national insecurity often inclined the Québécois to search not for the opinion of others but for their continual approval. From its first edition, this French book was taken nonetheless as a "model of Canadian literature."

We cannot overlook this aspect of the novel. It is, in fact, as important as the story and its undeniable quality as a work of literature. Adapting *Maria Chapdelaine*, now, in Québec, offers a chance to the Québécois to 're-appropriate,' in a way, their image and to put things in their real perspective. In essence, two alternatives present themselves to the screenwriter: either he can remain true to the novel and so redefine Québec through a stranger's eyes, or he can go against the grain of the novel and, using the story of Maria, impose a vision indigenous to Québec. In this case, he would place the foreign vision in its real perspective.

Once again, Gilles Carle prefers not to take sides. He sticks to anecdotes. What interests him is the passion, the almost supernatural quality of the novel, and the respect Hémon showed for physical effort, for nature and for the courage of the people. Carle's refusal to articulate any political message is expressed in two different ways.

First of all, as a director, he refuses to interpret *Maria Chapdelaine* in such a way as to present a realistic vision of the characters as Québécois. Worse still, he presents things in such a way that we can get the impression that, like Hémon, he is shaping Québec à la Française. He

introduces some picturesque details (as mentioned above), but there are other revealing details. There's the glaring fact that the *Péribonka habitants* speak an almost impeccable international French. The role of the priest, a paternalistic figure *par excellence* according to Hémon, is played by a French actor, Claude Rich. And it's Carole Laure, a star idolized by the French, who plays Maria Chapdelaine even though she does not typify the earthy image of the heroine described by Hémon. But, after all, this is not so surprising. We have to remind ourselves that this cinematographic adaptation of *Maria Chapdelaine* was above all the project of French producers attracted by the box-office appeal of Carole Laure. And it is only because of Laure that Carle got the job.

Secondly, as an adapter, Carle refuses to acknowledge any political content. This is indicated by his decision to kill off the mother before killing off François Paradis, thus reversing the novel's sequence of events. It is also indicated in his deliberately ignoring all the patriotic undertones that are present in the final chapters of the novel. In the book, Maria decides to marry Eutrope Gagnon partly out of respect for her dead mother's wish (to see this savage country domesticated) and partly for the sake of her people's future (to stay in Québec in spite of hardship). But in the film, she makes this decision for purely sentimental reasons. Because François Paradis, the love of her life, has just died, she resigns herself to marrying a man who loves her since she cannot marry the man she loves. Thus, what was a collective and 'nationalist' choice becomes a personal choice. From this point of view, it is strange to see that Carle, who claims to have liked *Les Plouffe* because one could see the general in the particular, does the reverse. He makes out of a novel dealing with a collectivity nothing more than a personal drama. Not only does Carle refuse to place the naive nationalism and the stifling isolationism in a more realistic and concrete perspective, but he simply ignores these elements altogether.

The fact that Carle ignores them, compounded with the shallow psychology of the film, makes *Maria Chapdelaine* a film that presents a superficial

Québec full of simple and simplistic people. Thus, the French idea of the Québécois, expounded by Hémon, is confirmed.

It is astounding that a Québécois filmmaker approaching the 'myth' of *Maria Chapdelaine* should give us such a politically bland film. To really understand what it's all about, it is interesting to note what Carle has said about his film: that although he doubted *Maria's* popularity in Québec, he was sure - smile intact - of its success in France. Thus the failure of *Les Plouffe* is avenged. The solution is simple. It is to give the French what they expect, even if it deals with our national image. Once again, Québec is the object, and not the subject, of this story aimed mainly at the French.

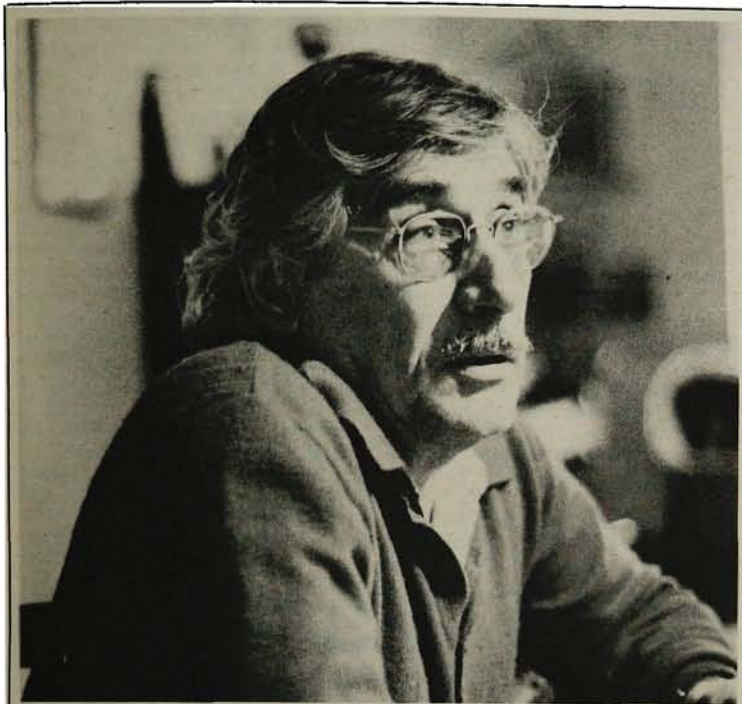
To study *Maria Chapdelaine* in light of other films by Gilles Carle does not provide more positive results. Even if many of his favorite themes can be identified (nature, sexuality, family, the Church), they are presented in an artificial and superficial way. They seem tacked on. His themes are not developed. They only serve the story. More than ever, Carle has put himself at the service of a story and so has subordinated many elements of his universe that were present in Hémon's novel in favour of Maria's story. Unlike his other films that possessed a loose structure with the story going off in many directions, by which the numerous themes and situations made the film open to several realities, *Maria Chapdelaine* unfolds around a single narrative thread. Without any doubt, this film is Carle's purest, most direct and most easily accessible work. All his themes are diluted and, though they are easily integrated into the story, their importance and impact are weakened.

The 'auteurist' approach to a film does not really work with *Maria Chapdelaine*. The film is first and foremost a commercial venture whose links with earlier films by Carle are too obvious to be interesting. Carle's presence can be felt only occasionally, especially in his treatment of the Church's authority. Maria's father looks at his watch during Mass, uninterested children recite their Catechism, and the people sing a hymn while François Paradis lies dying in the snow. All these little details articulate a certain critical attitude towards the Church, whether or not Carle owns up to this. The rest of the film is pretty thin. However, digging deep, we can associate the end of the film, when Maria Chapdelaine decides to marry Eutrope Gagnon, with other Carle films in which Laure has starred. Gagnon leads the same kind of life as Maria's father - and one of the recurring themes in Carle/Laure films is the search for the Father.

All in all, Carle's most recent film can only disappoint. It is disappointing for those who expect to be entertained, because of the cold and unbelievable characters. It is disappointing for those expecting to see the novel served up à la québécoise, because of Carle's refusal to engage himself in an openly political work. It is also disappointing to those who are searching for key elements that might shed new light on Gilles Carle's work as a whole. In fact, *Maria Chapdelaine* proves to be his weakest film. At least *Fantastica* was based on a more interesting and risky idea, whereas this adaptation of *Maria* is just a simple *mise-en-images*. Without imagination. Without audacity. Without life. Three factors without which no cinema is possible.



● The idol and the director: Carle instructs Carole Laure in *Maria Chapdelaine*



● "The left, you know, never revolutionized anything in art; that's too bad but that's the way it is"

Cinema Canada: *Until La Tête de Normande St-Onge, all your films seemed to be the result of a reaction – a reaction against the 'candid-eye' movement, against the French New Wave, against your last film. Is this method still the basis of your work?*

Gilles Carle: I always try to take people by surprise. First of all, I like my latest film to be unexpected, even for me, because I don't want to be caught in a rut, I want to live between each of my films. When I finished *Les Plouffe*, everybody offered me TV series, things like that, but I preferred to do a film on chess, a documentary called *The Great Chess Movie* or *Jouer sa vie*. I had just finished a film about life in Quebec during the war, and suddenly I was into the most contemporary world, dealing with the relations between East and West, the world as a big chess game, a very current movie. And now I have just done *Maria Chapdelaine*, which is a very unexpected project too, this novel written by Louis Hémon that has already been adapted twice on film. And after that, I'll probably direct a Christmas story for children.

Cinema Canada: *So we can say that the character of Maria Chapdelaine is, in a way, a creature of Gilles Carle?*

Gilles Carle: Inevitably it's true, even if you don't want it to be. The same thing happened to Louis Hémon. He came to Quebec to write *Maria Chapdelaine* and what did he do? He looked around and he took notes, and more notes, and more notes; he was the perfect observer, trying to be true to our culture. But, really, the result was more a Louis Hémon book than a Québécois book. It's much more of a Celtic book, a druidical book, a book from Brittany, than a book from Quebec, if we look at it closely. It's a book in which Christianity is superstitious, in which the real religion is more animistic, pantheistic, with its emphasis on physical efforts, relations with the

land, the trees, the wind, etc. So, of course, when I took *Maria Chapdelaine*, I wanted to keep myself from doing us just another Gilles Carle movie. I tried to hide it, but there's always something that escapes me, and its shows on the screen. We just can't help it, even if we don't want it to happen. I hate doing personal movies; on the contrary, I would like to be some sort of a collective filmmaker, but I can't help having my fantasies, my ideas, my background. I studied visual arts, so I have a tendency to do painterly things, just as (André) Forcier does things in a different way, whether he likes to or not.

Cinema Canada: *But when La tête de Normande St-Onge, your last film for Carle-Lamy, was released, you said: "From now on, I'm going to make more and more disturbing films," and you gave us Fantastica, Les Plouffe and Maria Chapdelaine. What happened?*

Gilles Carle: Well, it all depends where we're situated, and how. For example, you forget *L'ange et la femme*. I did it at my own expense in my basement. I processed it myself, nobody wanted to give me money. I did it with \$25,000. They refused it at the Semaine de la Critique here. The film was demolished everywhere, as if I had just produced a super flop. Nobody accepted it. I was a bit naive, believing that with a black-and-white movie, 16mm, produced with my own money, I would have some sympathy from the critics, but it was horrible! When the film was released, the newspaper critics were unanimous in their attack. But, of course, that changed, because two months after, I received a prize at the Avoriaz Festival, the Critics, Prize, and the film was strongly acclaimed by Arrabal, etc. Everything changed all at once. The critics were very favourable to the film, chiefly in the French Communist newspapers.

It was a very disturbing film that I did just after *Normande St-Onge*, so I didn't

Maria Chapdelaine :

Carle versus Louis Hémon

break my promise. After you make a film like that, what do you do? The contrary. And this is what happened with *Les Plouffe*. Everybody was against *L'ange et la femme*, so I said: "Nobody wants it? Then I'll make *Les Plouffe*." And after I made *Les Plouffe*, which was acclaimed everywhere, which had a big success... a film about chess. This too was a surprise for the public! And believe me, I refused everything everybody offered me at that time; everything, I refused all the publicity they offered me. Because while I investigated the chess world, gathered all the information I could find, and made sure every fact was precise and true, they gave me this poster showing a child playing chess – and there's no child in the film. So the producers said, "But you don't want your film to be seen!", and I said, "I don't want any news release, any publicity, just go to hell!" So what happened is that the Montreal World Film Festival made my film known – I took all the chances, all the risks. And the film dealt with a subject nobody wanted to hear about since 1925, not one film about chess since 1925, even television, which is interested in everything – curling, pool, etc. – didn't want to deal with this most fascinating world. Fascinating, because the world of chess is an intellectual world, a political world, but they just didn't want to hear about it. So, again, I did the contrary of what everybody was waiting for. And even now, after doing a film in which reason dominates, a film about a rational world, I do *Maria Chapdelaine*, which is a film about passion, feelings. And next time, it'll still be a surprise, because I don't want to do the same thing over and over. Everybody would like to label me, because I work fast and I please my producers – and in a way, it's true – but I want to do different things.

Cinema Canada: *Let's talk about Maria Chapdelaine. In La mort d'un*

bûcheron, the character played by Carole Laure was named Maria Chapdelaine, and this character falls in love with a man named François Paradis. Did you want, at that time, to do a film adaptation of the novel by Louis Hémon?

Gilles Carle: I think that one of the first films I ever wanted to shoot was *My Name is Maria Chapdelaine, Je m'appelle Maria Chapdelaine*. As far as I can remember, the myth of Maria Chapdelaine always interested me, probably because when I was very young I saw the film by Duvivier and I found it very strange. It didn't look like it was shot here in Quebec; I found the film bizarre. So it's probably at that time the idea came to me. And because it's a good story, too, a story that happens in a very precise place, a story that just couldn't happen anywhere else, that had to happen in this place where it came into the world. It's a beautiful story; and in Quebec we don't have too many love stories, we just didn't write many of them, so it's nice to tell each other "I love you," and this is what *Maria* is about, too. Feelings communicated by feelings.

Cinema Canada: *Isn't it a bit strange that Gilles Carle, who so often demystified the back-to-nature movement, now gives us Maria Chapdelaine?*

Gilles Carle: Well, you know, they said I demystified this movement because of *La vraie nature de Bernadette*. But it's untrue; what I did was say nature just doesn't exist anymore. When I shot *Bernadette*, jets were flying over my head, machines were running on the plains, but back at the time of *Maria Chapdelaine*, nature existed (laughs), that's why Hémon was here. If nature hadn't existed, Louis Hémon wouldn't have come to Quebec. So nature existed then, but not anymore. Urban society is everywhere now; whether we go to the country or to the Beauce, there isn't a place where urbanism isn't established.

But in 1910, it wasn't. So, there's nostalgia in *Maria*, and it's because he had nostalgia for a more primitive and purer humanity that Hémon came here. Just take a look at what he says about the Indians. His view of them is a very mythic one, the Indians of *Maria* are not real ones, they're seen from the eyes of Hémon; there's no sorcerer in the Montagnais community, you know. But Hémon said there was. He imagined these sorcerers, and all their rites, their mysteries. So there's this thing about the love potion, the magic, the cypress-wood fire, etc. It's all pure invention from a Frenchman living in Quebec. But I respect the book, and this nostalgia that he felt, this nostalgia for a primitive world. I put it in the movie - but it doesn't mean that I personally believe in nature and that I preach a return to nature in *Maria Chapdelaine*, far from it.

Cinema Canada: In the last interview you gave to Cinema Canada [No. 74, May 1981], you said you wouldn't like to work on an adaptation of a book whose author was dead. Did this situation cause you any problems?

Gilles Carle: Many. Many, many problems. I started working on the screen-

thought about showing flashbacks of François, and showing Maria thinking about him, to emphasize her revolt against God, but I just couldn't use this stupid method. So it's only when I finally decided that the film would end just after the death of François Paradis that I was really happy, and ready to do it, to work on *Maria Chapdelaine*. I had to show the death of the mother, because in the book this part is almost a book by itself, but I couldn't drag it on endlessly. I feel badly about these changes. *Maria Chapdelaine* is not a very old book, you know. And the work of Louis Hémon is very well known, so it was difficult. But now and then, when I look at the film, I find that it is still almost too faithful to the book, that I could have put some more drama into the film, added some more things.

Cinema Canada: Isn't it strange that Gilles Carle, a founder of Les Éditions de l'Exagone, a publishing house which rejected the primacy of French culture and all picturesque novels à la Lemelin, directed Les Plouffe and Maria Chapdelaine?

Gilles Carle: But *Les Plouffe* was written by a Québécois. It's not a picturesque

recites a thousand Ave (Marias) to make sure nothing bad happens to François.

Cinema Canada: But don't you think that Hémon was particularly condescending towards us?

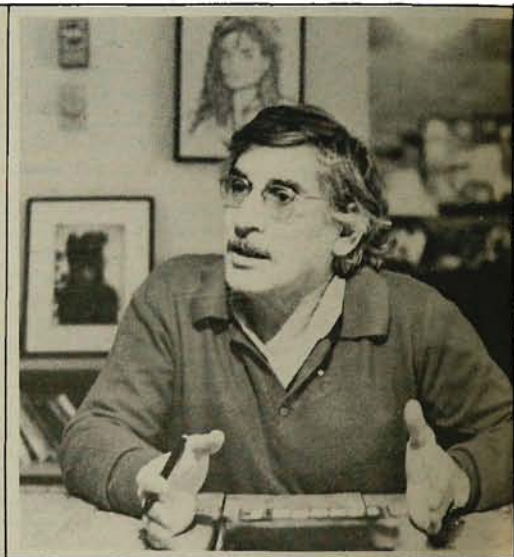
Gilles Carle: No, he wasn't. Hémon didn't believe much, he just believed in spirits, more than in God, and that's why the characters in *Maria Chapdelaine* don't seem to have a profound faith. All their gestures, their prayers, are superficial; when you look at it closely, there's not much profundity in that - except Maria's revolt, at the end, when she addresses herself to God and says, "Ah, Jesus, there wasn't even an angel to protect him, you couldn't find anybody to look after him!" There, for the first time, we have the impression she's talking to somebody that exists; that is, God. Before that, you know, the thousands Aves, the prayers at night, the demons, all kinds of demons (the demons of lies, etc., the mother has a demonology which is unbelievable), all that is not very serious.

Cinema Canada: You seem to have avoided all the political aspects of Maria Chapdelaine. Why?

When she's somewhere, nature vibrates in a different way. She's really a witch.

That's why Hémon was a pantheist, that's why he believed in the spirits of the Montagnais, the great Wendigo. I have been accused of inventing this, but I can take the book and read you many excerpts where it's very, very clear. But, before, nobody noticed that. I only did a re-reading of the book, and, knowing this mentality because of my father (who believed the Indians controlled the weather) and my uncles and my aunts, reconstituted it a bit more without exaggerating, making sure it had the same role as in the book. So, there's no rebellion, no politics. If we read the book very rapidly, we can say that it is a bit racist, in praising the race. It's because Hémon used the word "race" for the word "people," that's all.

It's a populist book, not a racist one. And we can say that his nationalism is more a regionalism; his nationalism is about the region of Lac-St-Jean, a corner of land. A regionalism like the one of the Bretons, of the Celts, that says you must be part of a family in order to communicate with the spirits. So he found his family, Hémon's religion is the religion of the farmers, the religion of the crops,



play only when I decided that I would be faithful to the meaning of the book, but without transposing it word by word. When I realized that this book was not a novel, but mainly an account; well, half the book is an account, and the other half is a kind of a reflection on the first half. And only when I realized that could I render all of Maria's thoughts, why she doesn't want to go to the States, why she wants to live at Pérignonka. I only had to show the beauty of Spring while she says "Yes, I'll stay." But these decisions were difficult. There has to be some betrayal, and for that you need the permission of the author, and I didn't have it. Lydia Hémon said that the film was perfectly faithful to the work of her father, but really it's not. It's only faithful to the meaning of the book.

Cinema Canada: But why the decision to show the death of the mother before the disappearance of François Paradis?

Gilles Carle: To serve the dramatic effect of the film. Because, at the movies, you cannot imagine things, you can't reflect on things as if you were speaking or reading; we just can't imagine that the film could have continued for 40 minutes after the death of François Paradis. If it had, I would have had to use flashbacks, and I hate this method. I

novel, it's a "familiar" novel, a novel of everyday life: picturesque is the view a stranger has of us, just as I have a picturesque view of France, not a "familiar" one. *Les Plouffe* is a "familiar" film. You know, in *Maria*, I restored all the "familiarity" of the subject, I left Hémon out of it because he made some mistakes, not many, but some, in his description of us. But I remained faithful to the context, the times. I was raised on the land, so I know the landscape from the inside, more than I knew the world of *Les Plouffe* ultimately. But *Les Plouffe* belongs to us, like *Les Misérables* to the French. You know, Lemelin was rebelling when he wrote *Les Plouffe*, and what was difficult was to render this rebellion properly. Because, don't forget, the book was Lemelin was taking position strongly against the Church, it was a very anti-clerical book.

Cinema Canada: Which is totally the opposite to the book by Hémon.

Gilles Carle: Well, Hémon was very polite, he wasn't at home, he was a guest. He wrote a sort of homage to Quebec, and at the end he fell into a sort of racism, you know. But it is clear, I think, in my film that this religious aspect is not too profound, that it is more of a superstition, like when Maria

Gilles Carle: Which political aspects? Nothing is political in the novel.

Cinema Canada: Well, like the role of the priests, and the choice Maria makes at the end, between the two men, each of them representing a very specific political choice for the Quebec people.

Gilles Carle: First, there's no criticism of the Church in the book, I don't see where Hémon criticizes the priests. There's no political criticism in *Maria Chapdelaine*. The choice at the end is a very schematic one, between the adventurer, the farmer and the American. But there isn't a single wicked character; Louis Hémon is incapable of describing a wicked character, or a vicious situation. His look is not political, he's only interested in the physical, the athletic, the beauty of things, the people. He was in love with the character of the father; he imagined him to be very tall, like Zeus in a way. In its relations with the landscape, the book is more profound than we think it is. It has a kind of lunar side, Maria is an enchantress. Maria is energy. You know, she's that kind of person who changes an atmosphere just by entering a room, everybody looks at her, and there's like a lunar atmosphere in the place. Take her out of the book and you're left with nothing,

of the sun, etc.; the true religion of these people, because we now know that the farmers were not so Catholic after all, that there's a religion which is more present in their lives; namely, the religion of nature. And that I tried to show in my film by the use of images. By the way, notice that there are more shots in this film than in *Les Plouffe*, twice as much as in any normal-length movie. I wanted to give the feeling that this film is all in one shot, I wanted the spectator to pass from one season to another without really noticing it. I wanted to give a sense of the passing of a year, of the cycle of the seasons.

You know, this book is very nourishing, there's a lot of detail, but not journalistic details. The details are not useless, they're always in relation to something else. It's a book in which there's a lot of imagination, it's a book that invented a new kind of love story. Each piece of information participates in the drama, which is the drama of living, and not the drama of individuals. And it is in this sense that the book is so seductive; that's why it was such a huge success.

It's also a book from the (political) right. Hémon, like all the great restorers, was a man of the right, like Celine. The left never revolutionized anything in art, you know; it's too bad but that's the

way it is. It's because the right touches structure, while the left touches individuals. It's always people from the right who break down forms, people who are related to existing structures. And I think that for Hémon, it's a bit the same thing; he broke the ancient pattern of the love story to construct a new one, based on the waiting of the woman, and the desperate effort of the man to reach her. And this pattern is also expressed in the landscape, the land, the country, with all those rivers and those waterfalls, symbols of ejaculation, of masculinity; and the lake, level and calm, not too deep, a lake that warms up easily (laughs), symbol of femininity. Harlequin books have cornered 12% of the international market, using the same story over and over again. Harlequin books, romance, they all copy *Maria Chapdelaine*. But getting back to Hémon, he was also revolutionary in his own way: he was the first sports columnist ever, he fought against pollution, he did his jogging...

Cinema Canada: Do you still believe in what you called "production families"; do you still believe, as you once said, that that's the only solution to Quebec cinema?

Gilles Carle: I personally believe, as I always did, in small production teams, in production families. I always try to have my own. Apart from my personal talent, this is what helps me continue shooting. But the big mistake with beginning filmmakers is that they associate with people like themselves. You need a truck driver who prefers to carry sets than to carry coal, or an accountant who would like working with a theater group better than at Household Finance, you know. You need people like that. I have my own family, and they have been constantly working with me for ten years now. We need these small teams. The other day, I saw a group from the south-shore (of Montreal) getting lost in the corridors of the NFB, and I was disappointed. Why go to the Board? We must organize ourselves, find money, do new things, but many people are afraid of accountants. But accountants are your friends, you know; you must deal with them. The more you have production teams, the more cinematic freedom; it's simple. Because if I shoot alone, there isn't much cinema freedom. Everybody has to make a film.

But cinema is disappearing anyway. It's finished; now it's television, and I don't know what's going to happen. These electronic instruments are very costly, you know. Bill 109 on the cinema in Quebec, like every law, comes too late. Everything is changing now; we have pay-TV, and all that, and it's all under federal regulations. I don't know what's going to happen, really.

Cinema Canada: And what do you think about closing down the NFB, as recommended by the Applebaum-Hébert report?

Gilles Carle: Damn it! Let's open the NFB, not close it. Closing it is not the solution, we must open it to young filmmakers, to new artists, give them a chance to work. If we close the NFB, where will the beginning filmmakers do their first film? You know I started there. Some changes, many changes, have to be made in the structure of the NFB, of course. But the solution is to open the NFB, not to close it. All that would do is put more people on the unemployment rolls. And who needs that?

Richard Martineau •

Gilles Carle's *Maria Chapdelaine*

Gilles Carle's new movie, *Maria Chapdelaine*, pushes all the right buttons to assure its success in Quebec, if nowhere else (in its first week alone, after opening Apr. 29, it brought in over \$190,000). Based on the 1913 novel of the same title by French expatriate Louis Hémon, the movie deals with the travails of a beautiful, taciturn, young woman trying to survive against all odds in the wilds of Lac St-Jean.

Quebec novelist Roch Carrier claims the novel has captured the Quebec imagination because it's not a work of precise ideas but rather what he calls "a vast emptiness" upon which readers can impose their own ideas or fantasies. Carle, working with a \$4.5-million budget, impose ideas all right - the virtues of obduracy ("j'y suis, j'y reste"), romanticization of alienation, *mon pays c'est l'hiver* and all that - and achieves a vast emptiness of his own: a hollow epic.

An overheated hack at the Montreal *Gazette* once called Carle's next-to-last film, *Les Plouffe*, Quebec's *Gone With the Wind*. This may mean that *Maria Chapdelaine* is our *Dr. Zhivago*, for all that that entails. There certainly is a lot of snow, and when there isn't, woodsy types pick blueberries and do countless other photogenic things, like walking by waterfalls or playing with the famille Chapdelaine's lovable mongrel.

The publicity material accompanying the movie makes a great deal of its authenticity and the difficulties the director faced in shooting four seasons in two months. It feels like Carle shot a lot more seasons than that, but then you tend to lose track after a while, as the authenticity marches steadily sidewise toward nostalgia. (Why, by the way, did no one think to age the costumes? Were lumberjacks really this stylish?)

Carle came late to the project, the third in a series of directors hired to make both a theatrical feature and a four-hour mini-series for Radio-Canada (think of the seasons in store for us there). He and his co-scenarist, Guy Fournier, have been publicly squabbling about which man's interpretation of the novel is the more correct, but in all their ideological wrangling, they didn't get around to solving the central dramatic flaw: Maria and her dashing suitor, the aptly named François Paradis, are almost never on screen together. When they are, they mainly moon about: he asks her to wait for him, she says OK, he departs, and the rest of the movie she waits. And worse, we wait with her.

The casting of Nick Mancuso as Paradis goes a long way to making us under-



• Quebec's answer to *Dr. Zhivago*: Nick Mancuso and Carole Laure in *Maria Chapdelaine*

stand this wait: who wouldn't wait for him? He has such dash and sense of his own presence - he even stands out in long shots of crowd scenes - it's a shame all that's left for him to do is get lost in the snow. He's too well-coiffed for a bucheron, but we can see the energy in him, the eagerness to do something, to make his part real, and that's so much more than can be said for most of the cast. There are at least a dozen acting styles going on here, running from pure maple-cured ham to *téléroman*-gothic, but then this is in keeping with the slapdash style of the whole project. There's no subtlety, no thought-out perspective. Nothing's left in the background for us to discover for ourselves, everything's dragged center-screen and klieg-lit, with Lewis Furey's incessant music providing the wholly unnecessary italics.

The darkly elegant Carole Laure plays Hémon's indomitable, homespun heroine. Laure and Carle have been working together for a long time now (*Fantastica*, *L'Ange et la femme*, *La tête de Normande St-Onge*, *La mort d'un bucheron*), and it's time someone told them to cut it out: they're absolute poison for each other. Laure has revealed a flair for comedy with other directors (in Blier's *Get Our Your Handkerchiefs* and Joyce Bunuel's *Dirty Dishes*), but Carle doesn't seem to want her to act - he poses her. (Their previous collaborations have been notable for her nudity, so much so that local wags who saw the 1975 *La tête de Normande St-Onge* promptly renamed it *Les fesses de...*) For all the dramatic intensity he gets out of Laure's sophisticated, slightly ironic beauty, he might as well be shooting

magazine covers. In Carle's scheme of things, Laure is indomitable all right - indomitably chic. When she goes out to slop the hogs, that trademark blue-black hair sleeking down her slender back, her pancake applied to perfection, delectably soigné in that layered look so popular in the bush, it's the giddiest piece of miscasting since Marie-Antoinette played shepherdess at Versailles.

Will Aitken •

MARIA CHAPDELAINE d. Gilles Carle exec. p. Harold Greenberg p. Murray Shostak. Robert Baylis sc. Guy Fournier. Carle, based on the novel by Louis Hémon d.o.p. Pierre Mignot art d. Jocelyn July 2nd unit photography Richard Leiterman ed. Avde Chiriaeff sd. eng. Patrick Rousseau p. man. Lorraine Richard head unit man. Mario Nadeau 1st a.d. Jacques Wilbrod Benoît prop. master Ronald Fauteux cost. des. Michele Hamel head cost. dresser Blanche-Danielle Boileau head make-up Micheline Poisy hair. Andre Lafresniere cont. Ginette Senecal head elect. Daniel Chretien head machinist François Dupere sp. efx. John Thomas unit man. Ginette Guillard public relations David Novak Associates Inc. unit pub. Mark Lalonde stills Pierre Dury compt. Fred Shacter p. acct. Carole Lagace p. sec. Micheline Cadieux p. coord. in Montreal Marie-Hélène Roy 2nd a.d. Monique Maranda 3rd a.d. Jacques Laberge asst. unit man. Louis-Philippe Rochon 1st asst. cam. Jean Lepine 2nd asst. cam. Christiane Guernon 3rd asst. cam. Nathalie Mollavko-Visotsky 2nd unit asst. cam. Larry Lynn elect. Claude Fortier. Robert Lapierre Jr. machinist Michel Periard boom Veronique Gabillaud asst. art d. Raymond Dupuis props. Alain Singher asst. props Philippe Chevalier. Henri Gagnon, Jean Labrecque, Josiane Noreau set dresser Patrice Bengle 2nd set dresser Simon La Haye const. Andre Bochu, Michel Bochu, Jean-Marie Vallerand, Gaston Brassard head painters Robert Breton, Rejean Paquin painters Guy Lalonde, Gilles Desjardins, Jean-Paul Montreuil sp. efx. asst. Bill Orr. Ken Johnson sp. efx. Roby Baylis asst. cost. des. Christiane Tessier, John Stowe asst. to cost. des. Pierre Perrault cost. dresser Renee April make-up Joan Isaacson p. asst. Michel Veillette. Andre Ouellet, Angele Bourgault messengers Ellen Berube, Alain Belhumeur drivers Pierre Guillard, Sylvain Falardeau chief cook Kitty Baylis cook Leo Evans asst. in kitchen Richard Carroll l.p. Carole Laure, Nick Mancuso, Pierre Curzi, Donald Lautrec, Yoland Guerdan, Amulette Garneau, Stephane Query, Guy Thauvette, Gilbert Sicotte, Josee-Anne Fortin, Louis-Philippe Milot, Gilbert Comtois, Paul Berval, Claude Rich, Claude Evrand, Dominique Briand, Marie Tifo, Jean-Pierre Masson, Angele Arseneault, Jacques Thisdale, Rod Tremblay, Claude Prezent, Patrick Messe, Guy Godin, Denis Blais, Michel Langevin, Cedric Noël, Jose Ledoux, Renee Girard, Roch Demers, Gilbert Moore, Gilles Valiquette, Yvon Sarrazin, Rolland Bedard, Michel Rivard, Georges Levtehouk, Raoul Duguay p.e. Astral Film Productions Limited, in collaboration with La Societe Radio-Canada and TF1, the first television network of France. colour 35mm running time 108 min.

• *Maria Chapdelaine* gets strong acting assists from France's Claude Rich and Quebec's Marie Tifo



Canada at Cannes '83 :



The Year of the mole

● Illusions' end: Ann Hui's *Boat People* is a rough shocker about Vietnam today

by Marc Gervais

Last year's grimmest forebodings, sad to relate, have been surpassed by this year's reality; and it appears that, as a result, the Cannes Film Festival has been irreparably damaged, its spirit smothered in tons of concrete ugliness.

Thirty-six years ago, what was to become the world's biggest and best movie festival first began as a joyous get-together for the French and then was one long celebration of film art, spectacle, people; and the beauty of its setting guaranteed success. With success came growth. And further growth. A radical shift occurred when the Festival decided to become a Market as well: the event would never be the same. Business realities gradually took over; and managers and agents moved in on the person-

Marc Gervais, CRTC commissioner and a member of the Communications department at Concordia University, is a regular contributor to Cinema Canada.

al side, dictating the course of events. The stars still came and went but under orders, reduced to essential commodities in the bartering of spectacle.

So the personal side suffered. The destruction of that aspect of the Festival became inevitable with the total televising of Cannes. Henceforth the electronic box would be boss, every event created, and validated by TV consumption. In previous years, to be sure, the photographers were apt to vulgarize any situation at any given moment, but never in terms of total control of the very nature of the thing itself.

The process of destruction, one is tempted to write, has been completed with the opening of the "Nouveau Palais." Contemporary architects, responsible for the obscenities which have defaced the Paris landscape (not to mention the Montreal Olympics debacle) have done it again. The loveliness of Cannes' bay, the result of the fusion of sun, sand, sea, sky, and mountain back-drop, is now scarred by the enormous new festival centre. Picture an immense, yellowish,

pink fortress straight out of Hollywood desert films of yore - and that is the good news! Inside, things get worse. The Cannes Film Festival now has the look and feel of a typical North American shopping centre. Electronic junk everywhere, escalators, bottle-necks, piped-in musical noise. Nature has been resolutely excluded, to be replaced by enormous indoor crowds enclosed in the barbaric dehumanization that passes for much of modern architecture - a veritable triumph of ugliness and spiritual stupor.

If anything of warmth, personality, soul or genuine event were left before the Nouveau Palais emerged, forget it now. Here is a Festival without a centre, without, yes, a soul. Mediated experience is the rule. No "real" reel events or people, but fragmented, mediated snippets, mass-manufactured, an appalling realization of the worst aspects of McLuhan's prophetic vision.

To say that the recent development is a disaster is merely to share in an amazingly unanimous consensus. And the result, in lived, individual personal

terms (as opposed to media representation) is palpable: the old Cannes crowd is lost, wandering up and down the Croisette, unsure where "everybody" is... over at the Carlton? or the old Palais? down at the over-crowded Majestic? or across the street in "the new Bunker" (as it is called with anything but affection)? The anger and frustration of the *festivalliers*, let it be noted, is only exceeded by that of the native Cannois.

Which is not to say that the movie event is no more, that Cannes is not swallowed up in the usual fever of film, film, film - on the market, in the official competition, in the parallel manifestations. Doves of airplanes, for example, still drag their banners across Cannes skies, announcing the Salkinds' forthcoming *Superman III*, *Supergirl*, and *Santa Claus*. James Bond is more in evidence than ever, still protecting the Croisette, still dominating the Carlton entrance (in his Roger Moore incarnation), but now also perched smiling atop the Majestic marquee (in his Sean Con-

FESTIVALS

nery reincarnation). And the cocktails are de riquer, the "starlets" still manage to be pursued by the photographers. Some things do not change...

Some think, perhaps. But other things do. Take the once splashy, energetic, vital Canadian presence. This year, one is tempted to refer to Cannes '83 as the Year of the Invisible Canadians. Or perhaps more accurately as the Year of the Mole.

Real moles, as we all know, live underground. And there we were - I mean the only official Canadian presence, i.e., the CFDC stand - buried in the basement of the Nouveau Palais among countless other scurrying, subterranean creatures. The dedicated CFDC denizens were coping as well as they could, in the circumstances to be sure. But the minimal data, limited services, and absence of promotion stand witness to an appalling come-down from the recent past, when Canada (whatever the criticisms, the hype for inferior products, what have you) served as a model for just how to be present at Cannes in order to help the cause of the Canadian feature industry.

No danger of any criticisms this year about our "excesses". While national groups like the Australians or New Zealanders, or independent big American companies, say, gave evidence of vitality, verve and Festival enthusiasm, Canada oscillated between Puritan austerity and pure no-show. Our Film Commissioner/head of the NFB was nowhere in evidence; and the CFDC chief was back home as well, working zealously on the modalities of how to administer Francis Fox's new production fund. More immediately glamorous presences (in the film sense) also were not in evidence - stars, directors, and the like. Canadian films received scarcely any publicity, there were no notable Canadian parties; indeed the Canadians in attendance were as scattered as the Festival itself.

All except Ontario, that is. That doughy province affirmed the Canadian fact (i.e., we exist) with a smashing good get-together, co-sponsored with the Toronto Festival of Festivals. The Quebec office had a few functions of its own, but the point here was that these were hardly Canadian events, right? And so what else is new...?

None of this is shattering, when stacked up against world starvation, nuclear arms races, pollution, the suppression of peoples. But given what Cannes is all about, and given the enormous gains of the past, one wonders why on earth we seem dedicated to throwing it all away. If you're going to do it, mate, you go all out, as our Aussie cousins say - and do.

The CFDC people explained courteously and patiently that there were no funds available, that there was no need of a splashy official presence as in the past, we had grown beyond that, and that, in any case, that was the way the independent Canadian producers preferred it.

Sure enough, Canadian producers were about, discreet in numbers and more discreet in how they appeared or how they displayed their treasures. John LeCarré has taught us that moles - the other kind - prefer not to have their true identity revealed. And so, the Canadian producers surfaced quietly. Apparently, there were some 25 features, of recent or not so recent vintage, to be seen one way or another. But their Canadian identity tended to be masked, packaged

as they were by American sellers such as Manson and Jensen Farley, in small semi-public or on-invitation-only showings.

Even so, *The Grey Fox* elicited some enthusiastic response in a sneak showing at the end, and *The Terry Fox Story* a more mixed reaction near the beginning of the festival. Two Québécois products actually made it, sans fanfare, to prestigious parallel events. Alas, Pierre Perault's *La bête lumineuse* proved disappointing, not to say downright false and pretentious, with nothing fresh to reveal. Brigitte Sauriol's *Rien qu'un jeu* is an honest and forthright treatment of a difficult subject (a father's sexual doings with his two daughters), but too often it slips into awkward dialogue, even bathos.

The business side, however, did occasion a lot of the usual activity - buying and selling, setting up projects and deals - even though Canadian distributors were looking more and more desperate as American majors or next-to-majors were gobbling up everything in sight with their new "classic" departments, and Canadian producers grow more and more frustrated in the face of often changing, often conflicting rules and procedures emanating from government agencies (DOC, CFDC, CBC, CRTC - you name em, we got 'em, and don't forget the provinces). Just to make sure that everyone stayed depressed, the rumours from back home were coming closer to reality: C Channel was closing down.

So the Canadian picture continues to be a desperately muddled one, needing far-reaching measures which spring from knowledge and experience. Given the profound contradictions within our system, perfect coherence in our policies is impossible. There will always be the odd Canadian film that enjoys enormous financial success at the expense of any Canadian cultural validity. And market demands, as presently understood and experienced, will continue to further the erosion. On the other hand, others will demonstrate that there is another possibility, that films can be popular and "genuinely Canadian". (Will *The Grey Fox* be one of these?)

On that inconclusive and fuzzy note, and having side-stepped mention of individual names and realities or engaging in any kind of nuanced discussion of the issues - totally beyond the limits of this report - one can end the Canadian chapter by stating quite simply that in many ways this was the least inspiring and most understated Canadian presence in Cannes in over 15 years.

The Cannes Film Festival, this May, 1983, however, was not just oppressive concrete and Canadian lack of verve. There were the films from all over the world; and even if no single movie was the occasion for rhapsodies of enthusiasm (such as *E.T.* last year), still there were plenty of interesting things to be experienced.

And that is inevitable, since Cannes has been entrenched for years as the world centre. For the Canadian critic, that means the opportunity, second to none, to get an over-view of what is happening world-side to film art, or to the film industry for that matter. Otherwise, what filters through to Canada is by and large via the funnel of New York critics' approval or American distributors' decisions - or the often laudable coups scored by our own film festivals; impressive, but not in any measure able to complete with Cannes.

More than ever for me, this year's Cannes festival was a hodge-podge of personal choices or guesses made from the official competition, the parallel events, and the Market (over three hundred films there alone). Over all, certain trends, and a few marvelous surprises.

The giants

The official competition, for example, acquired heavy artistic gravity with the presence of no less than three contemporary giants and all of them most difficult, most uncompromising of auteurs (the first two, by the way, shared the Best Director award). France's Robert Bresson presented *L'Argent* (Money), a ruthlessly austere study of evil (and grace) that pushes this most rigorous and severe of artists even further along

the closed system of his own intensely personal cinema. Not everyone's cup of tea, to be sure, and yet not as demanding - if that is the proper word - as the Russian Andrei Tarkovsky's Italian film, *Nostalghia*, surely the Festival's most impenetrable exploration of the human spirit, a poetic, suffering affirmation of human hope - and therefore in all likelihood not destined for distribution in North America. Ermanno Olmi, whom many consider the greatest of Italian film directors now working, came with his story of the Magi, *Cammina, Cammina* (Onward, Onward), not quite up to his Grand Prix winner of a few years ago (*The Tree of the Wooden Clogs*), but still a film master's glowing work of profound contemporary relevance.

And in the market one could see the latest works (if not their very best) of Ingmar Bergman (*Fanny and Alexander*), Andrzej Wajda (*Danton, made in France*), and Eric Rohmer (*Pauline on the Beach*). Here are examples of film masters in total control creating works that raise film unquestionably to the level of mature arts.

The light heavyweights

Not quite in that exalted company, yet enjoying a rich measure of world recognition, a number of other directors were in attendance with excellent films. Japan did well. Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* is a haunting study of military prison-camp life, far removed from Oshima's usual brilliant (and kinky) excesses. Shohei Inamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* actually won the Grand Prix for its splendid up-dating of the classic Japanese film of 25 years ago. Claude Goretta continues his intellectually rewarding exploration of life today with *The Death of Mario Rissi* (Switzerland), an agonized meditation on world starvation and racial tension. And Carlos Saura (Spain) gave Cannes one of its most popular films, a stirring, energetic, partly Flamenco version of Bizet's *Carmen*. Martin Ritt's *Cross Creek* (USA) a few notches lower because of its overdone lushness, nonetheless is a fascinating, lovely film about the novelist Marjorie Kinan Rawlings - and demonstrates again that an artist can be a

● A searing affirmation of human hope: dissident USSR director Andrei Tarkovsky's made-in-Italy film, *Nostalghia*



FESTIVALS

genuinely involved humanist and still thrive in Hollywood.

Unexpected joys

Perhaps the biggest bonus one can experience in Cannes film viewing is the surprise discovery of unheralded quality. A simple, unpretentious little Norwegian film, Knut Andersen's *Friends*, provides just that in a finely controlled story of some 12 year-olds trying to cope with their friend's alcoholic father – and without succumbing to sentimentality. At a much more ambitious level – and probably my most satisfying film viewing experience in Cannes '83 – was *Ascendancy*, written and directed by Edward Bennett, and produced by the British Film Institute for less (unbelievably) than three hundred thousand pounds. This re-creation of Belfast in the '20s version of the "troubles" offers startling confirmation that the British cinema is indeed experiencing a renaissance – and that it is possible to produce high quality films without going the bloated route of American distribution guarantees and all that that entails. Yet another "small" film was Ann Hui's *Boat People* (Hong Kong). Rough, unpolished, direct, it shocks the viewer with its depiction of conditions in South Vietnam under the present regime. And it is overwhelming in making us feel the flight of those who chose to be "boat people." Needless to add that certain Communist groups are not pleased with this one, destroying as it does, a myth still clung to by some.

The Aussies

My final candidate for the delightful surprise category has to be an Aussie film – and a surprise simply because most of the names were unknown to me. Or to put it in other words, the Aussies seem to come up with talent wave upon talent wave. Brilliantly acted by Lorna Lesley, Bill D. Kerr and John Jarratt, and (seemingly) effortlessly put together by producer Robert Bruning and director Howard Rubie, *The Settlement* makes no claims to high art. It is simply one of those thoroughly enjoyable, funny, touching little gems that delights its audience while hiding its immense intelligence and understanding of human nature and heart. All of which leads as inevitably to Australia and its peculiar interest for Canadian film folk (see Cinema Canada No. 94).

Whatever one may hear, the Australian film industry is *not* in a state of crisis; on the contrary, it is modestly thriving, and solid in its plans for the future. As I write this, the final amendments to the tax law (extending the 150% exemption over a two-year period) are being enacted. Now the Australians will be able to rationalize their output over an all-year-round production schedule. Moreover, four or five cases of entrepreneurial rip-off (as we Canadians put it) are being dealt with severely, so that the ranks of the perpetrators are being pruned. Pared down, that is, to the normal state of Australian film affairs, in which film people, really caring about products and knowing the intricacies of the art form and the business, are by and large in control.

Cannes was once again a showcase for good Aussie films. True, some big Aussie directors, having "succumbed" to the challenge of the Hollywood feature, presented American films: Fred Schepisi's disappointing, empty tour de force, a western called *Barbarosa*, and Bruce Beresford's superb *Tender Mercies*, are cases in point. But the home component in its genuine form still

thrives. Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* was probably the best English-speaking film in competition. And the market offered such superior work as Peter Maxwell's *The Highest Honours*, and *Far East*, a fine contemporary thriller rich in insight and social involvement, by one of Australia's finest director/producer teams, John Duigan and Richard Mason.

So Australia goes on proving that a small country can do it. And it is one of the riches of the Cannes Film Festival that we are afforded the opportunity of witnessing just such a salutary phenomenon.

A few final comments more or less related to what has gone before.

1. Cannes has lost much with this final succumbing to gigantic size. The authorities, however, are already planning to solve the problems. With courage and some good hard thinking, it is conceivable that even the Bunker can serve, if it is integrated with a resurrected old Palais. The Festival could be made a place with space and with a more human pattern, a more gracious rhythm. It is possible, maybe.

2. Another pattern – this one a film production/distribution one – is clearly emerging. The general thinking now is that genuine co-production is the way of the future, the only way for European and other countries to avoid outright American control. And therein lies an incalculably important story, one of crucial interest to Canada, and a hopeful alternative, if correctly understood and resolutely put into practice.

3. Showbiz, hustling, vulgarity, pollution, business, hype or whatever else – Cannes is increasingly all of this. And when one reports on the total impact, certain aspects tend to be neglected. For it is also at Cannes that Orson Welles presented a special award for creative artistry to a crusty, intransigent, 76-year-old film aristocrat named Robert Bresson. And where the mad Monty Python gang receives artistic recognition as well. And there are remarkable gestures, testifying of a profound awareness and solidarity. Andrei Tarkovsky, the brilliant director who is barely tolerated in the USSR by the regime, receives awards not only from the official Cannes jury but from the international critics and from the ecumenical juries as well. What this could mean for him, but also in terms of broader cultural possibilities, is incalculable. And Cannes remembers its past. Beautifully restored prints of great, sometimes neglected, films of the past are regularly shown. Books are honored. In a special ceremony, the young American film scholar, Dudley Andrew, and François Truffaut and others, gathered to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the death of one of film history's greatest and most beautiful thinkers, Andre Bazin, father, in a sense of *Les cahiers du cinema* and of *la nouvelle vague*. Cannes is all of this as well.

4. The final, final word. We are not living at a time when film art is being renewed. There are no startling new developments, and Cannes made this abundantly clear. As indicated earlier, there was not even a single acclaimed "masterpiece" in evidence. On the other hand, a number of serious, excellent films witness to a growing outrage at the folly and evil of today's power game. Cannes showed us an art form that is rich in conscience and consciousness.



● Flamboyant Flamenco steals a scene in Carlos Saura's *Carmen*



● David Bowie adds his androgynous touch to Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*



● Martin Ritt's *Cross Creek* proves one can have a soul and still earn a living in Hollywood

At times, the cry borders on cosmic despair; but there is an amazingly strong assertion repeated time and again, calling for respect for human dignity, and, indirectly at least, expressing a hope that concerted human effort is possible.

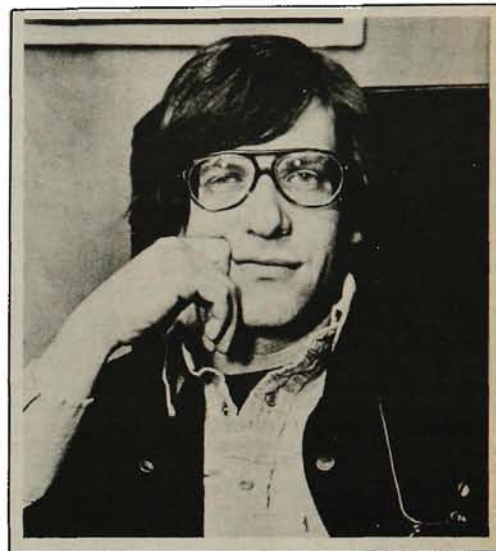
This may not be the reason most folk

go to the movies back home, but that was a dominant tone in many of the major works shown in Cannes this May.

So, yellowish-pink Bunkers not withstanding, maybe it is still worth the effort after all.

The word, the flesh and the films of David Cronenberg

by John Harkness



Let's talk about evil. In the horror film, there are basically two kinds of evil, with characters and actions falling on a continuum between interior evil and exterior evil. Interior evil is that created within characters (Norman Bates in *Psycho*, the shape in *Halloween*) as a result of warps in their psychological makeup or because of their relationship with society. Exterior evil is an outside force which attacks what Robin Wood would no doubt refer to¹ as the bourgeois patriarchal normalcy of our society – the devil invading Regan in *The Exorcist* is a good example, as are the vampires in any given version of *Dracula*, or the space spores in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (either version).

When critics treat the films of David Cronenberg, however, they generally make a singular error in confining his films to the realm of the horror film, which limits the approach one can take by ignoring their most important element: that of science fiction. Admittedly, this is easy to do, because examples of true science fiction films have become increasingly rare in the past two decades, and the boundaries have never been exactly clear (*The Andromeda Strain* and *THX 1138* are almost the only pure science fiction films of recent years that come to mind) and while a film like *Alien* is marketed as science fiction, its horror element outweighs the science element almost two to one.

What is important about the science fiction element is that the scale of evil in science fiction films is not the continuum from interior evil to exterior, but from accidental to intentional. Did the mad scientist create a human being (*Frankenstein*) or did he create a monster (later versions of the same story, when the creature loses his speech and his innate decency), and which did he mean to create?

Thus Robin Wood's consignment of Cronenberg's films to the category of "reactionary" horror films², based on

what he calls Cronenberg's "sexual disgust" and "the projection of horror and evil onto women and their sexuality" misses the point almost entirely, because he is dealing with Cronenberg in the same terms as Wes Craven and George Romero – as a horror-filmmaker who attempts to examine the nature of society's structure and its dehumanizing of the individual.

If I take issue with Robin Wood, it is less out of dislike (Wood, with a group of like-minded fellows – Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, and Tony Williams, most of whom studied with Wood at some point – is one of the few major critics to examine the subterranean side of the American cinema represented by exploitation filmmakers like Romero and Craven) than resentment of the way his quintessentially ideological approach to the contemporary cinema acts as a strait-jacket on the films he examines. Politically

correct filmmakers who attack the notions of bourgeois normality (Craven, Romero, Tobe Hooper, Stephanie Rothman) are by definition better than conservative directors like Brian De Palma and David Cronenberg, who by almost any critical standard are better filmmakers than the aforementioned directors.

Wood and company operate within a critical system that acts to limit their viewpoint to issues that deal with repression of alternative forms of sexual and moral expression in the structure of contemporary capitalist society.

It is significant that these concerns emerged in Wood's criticism after he came out of the closet (in the London Times Educational Supplement in 1974) with his own gayness, for it is possible to argue seriously that Wood was a better critic when he was repressing his homosexuality. His books on Hawks, Bergman and Hitchcock are classics of bourgeois

humanist criticism (using neither of these terms pejoratively), whereas the tone of his more recent work suggests that we should ignore that earlier phase of his criticism because it was presented to us under false pretences.

The ideological tunnel-vision of Robin Wood ignores the component of science in Cronenberg's work and it is the science element that lifts the director's work above the realm of the exploitation horror film. There is furthermore a darkly Cronenbergian irony to what Wood once wrote about *Shivers*, ("a film singlemindedly about sexual liberation, a prospect it views with unmitigated horror... The release of sexuality is linked inseparably with the spreading of venereal disease"³) now that the most explosive liberation of sexual energy of recent years, in the gay world, has been linked to the spreads of AIDS and Kaposi's Sarcoma (known as "gay cancer").

What I hope to do here is examine the relationship between the two types of evil engendered by the marriage of science fiction and horror, the role of science, and the function of the victims in the cinema of David Cronenberg, particularly the way that Cronenberg's thematic has evolved in terms of the intentionality of the science fiction films from experimentation to accident, from specific to general malaise within the films themselves and within the oeuvre.

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions

It is worth noting that there are very few outright villains in the cinema of David Cronenberg. Dr. Emile Hobbes, who creates the parasites in *Shivers*, is attempting to break down the barriers in man, "an over-intellectual creature who has lost touch with his body." When he realizes what he has done, he commits suicide. Dr. Lawrence Kelloid, who performs the skin grafts that become much, much more in *Rabid*, is attempting to save the life and beauty of that film's heroine, who has been horribly burned in a motorcycle accident. *The Brood's* psychotherapist, Dr. Hal Raglan, is attempting to get his patients



● Invasion of privilege: *The Brood* was Cronenberg's version of the whitebread melodrama

John Harkness is the film critic of Toronto's *NOW* magazine, and a regular contributor to *Cinema Canada*.

to bring out their repressions and terrors into a physical manifestation that can be cured, removing the neuroses. Dr. Paul Ruth had no idea that he would be creating a generation of *Scanners* when he invented his tranquilizer ephemeral.

With the exception of *Videodrome*, which we will deal with later, the villains in Cronenberg's films are not his scientists, but outsiders to the central worlds of the characters - *Scanners*' Keller, who is collaborating with the Scanner underground for his own power; *Fast Company*'s corporate manager, who fails to understand the obsession with speed that powers his drivers; the collector in the short film, *The Italian Machine*, who buys a phenomenal motorcycle then puts it in his living room as an objet d'art. The crime in all these films is not ambition as much as it is stupidity.

The problem with intelligence, of course, is that it is human, and thus limited. The failure of the majority of Cronenberg's scientists is that all the implications of everything they do is never quite apparent. Unlike, say, a computer with a chess program, they cannot work out all the implications of each move.

Cronenberg has said that "I make no attempt to say that scientists go too far. I'm very ambivalent about the ecology

resurrected from the dead by a team of dedicated surgeons. The scientific explanation of the strange new organ she develops - a syringe in the armpit that draws blood from her victims and leaves them carrying a virulent form of rabies - is one of Cronenberg's great coups in scientific terms. When Rose receives skin grafts, the graft tissue is rendered morphogenetically neutral (all tissue is the same tissue), assuming that the body will absorb the tissue into its biosphere, ignoring the fact that in intensive care, the body is operating under a different system (being fed on plasma) and that the grafts may absorb the body into a new ecology.

In *Shivers* and *Rabid*, both the "villains" and the "victims" (both terms are to be used with extreme care) are unwitting. The scientific intervention is a physical invasion that effects the brain. When they realized the nature of their actions - Dr. Hobbes in *Shivers* and Rose in *Rabid* - the effect is to kill them, because both commit suicide. The message is quite plain: knowledge kills.

It is reflected very plainly in the straightforward style of the two films. These are not horror films that relish dark corners and lurking menace, but rigidly controlled frames and tautly Apollonian environments - sterile modern apartment buildings and hospitals, and clean, Canadian shopping centres and subways. In an American horror film, it is not at all surprising to find slashers stalking 42nd Street or wolves in the South Bronx, for these are deranged environments, decaying and corrupt. The high-tech beauty of Cronenberg's environments are logical monuments to clarity and order, and the eruptions of madness and disease in these regions is much more shocking. Even his casting of Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid* reflects this ambition, for Chambers, who is all muscle and sinew, is the most high-tech of all the porn queens, a product of self-design (clearly a lady who spends a lot of time in the gym). The film would have been very different had he been allowed to follow his original casting of Sissy Spacek in the lead.

Children of rage

The relationships in *Scanners*, *The Brood* and *Stereo* reverse the terms of *Shivers* and *Rabid* in two major ways.

First, the films move from the relative freedom of the rootless characters of *Shivers* and *Rabid* into the heart of the basic unit of our society - the family. Second, the emphasis shifts almost diametrically from the effects of the body on the mind to the effects of the mind on the body.

Almost as important, there is a shift in the type of science involved. Dr. Raglan in *The Brood* and Dr. Ruth in *Scanners* do not intervene nearly as radically in the biology of the human body as do their predecessors (*Stereo*, Cronenberg's first, experimental, feature film, is somewhat different, and is included in this discussion as it stands as a rough draft of *Scanners*). There is no surgery in *The Brood* and *Scanners*. Both films deal with a sort of telepathic murder - directly in *Scanners* and by a secondary agent in *The Brood*.

The Brood is Cronenberg's version of the whitebread melodrama (he has described it as his own version of *Kramer vs. Kramer*), and the genre is concerned with the violation of privileged middle-class space by unbearable emotions, usually centred on the loss and recovery of a child (cf. *Ordinary People*, *Without*



● The image invades the mind: James Woods and Deborah Harry in *Videodrome*

a *Trace*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Table for Five*).

As a psychiatrist, Dr. Hal Raglan is doing exactly what he is supposed to do; that is, help people bring out their repressed emotions and conflicted desires. His tragedy is that he succeeds all too well, and as one of the few characters in Cronenberg's work to suffer from hubris, he has no idea of when to stop. When confronted with mad Nola Carveth, whose husband has institutionalized her because he fears for the safety of their daughter, he uncovers the bruised, violent soul of a child abused by her mother and ignored by a weak, ineffectual father. While his other patients remain attached to their violent neuroses - one develops a series of welts on his body, another a set of lymphic enlargements that dangle from his neck like the wattles of a turkey - Nola is his prize patient, because she produces actual children, monstrous simulacra without retinae, teeth, speech, sexuality or navels. They are, quite literally, manifestations of her rage (they are short-lived) who are connected to her not by an umbilical cord, but by a mental link that directs them against those she sees threatening her - her mother and father, a pretty school teacher her husband

finds attractive, and ultimately her doctor.

There has been research on the effects of the emotion on our physical beings - calmness and tranquility seem to be related to longevity almost as surely as natural foods and physical exercise - thus *The Brood* has a beautiful perverse logic: If a healthy mind can help the maintenance of a healthy body, cannot the forcing of sick emotions to the surface cause physical changes?

Yet Dr. Raglan is not the villain of the piece. The villain is Nola's own family and the incomprehending decency of her husband, whose job is restoring old homes (a nicely pointed bit of symbolism). In *The Brood*, science is only able to discover and awaken monsters - the seeds are planted deep within the characters themselves, and Nola contains so many seeds that only death can cure her. *The Brood* demonstrates the way that the family can serve as a source of evil and delusion (as Nola's mother remarks, "Thirty seconds after you're born you have a past, and sixty seconds after, you start lying to yourself about it").

Like most of the characters in *The Brood*, *Scanners*' Dr. Paul Ruth is a master of self-deception, believing that

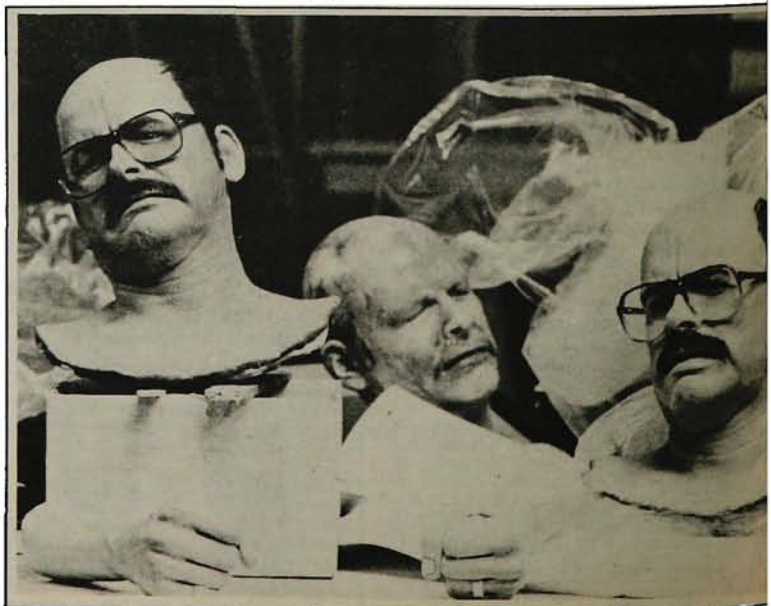


● The body invaded in *Shivers*

movement, for instance. It's not at all clear to me that the natural environment for man is the woods - for all we know, it could be downtown Chicago. The thing about man, the unique thing, is that he creates his own environment. It's in his nature to try to take control of it away from chance. So in a sense, my doctors and scientists are all heroes. Essentially, they're symbolic of what every human tries to do when he brushes his teeth."

The irony, of course, is that chance cannot be controlled, and it is the accident that defeats human intelligence in every one of his films. The distance between what Cronenberg says his films are about (the intentional fallacy) and what people perceive them as is immense. Were the people in *Starliner* apartments (in *Shivers*) better off as repressed zombies in a sterile planned environment or are they better off as crazed sexual zombies in the throes of an orgiastic hunger? Cronenberg views the spread of the parasites in that film as liberating. Yet the predatory sexuality of the various victims is presented in terms of the classic horror film, as if proving the dictum to be found on the wall of the doctor who is one of the film's centres of sanity ("Sex is the invention of a very clever venereal disease").

Rose in *Rabid* is a zombie in a different sense, for she has almost literally been



● The invasion of the flesh: in *Scanners* Louis Del Grande's head blows up

the generation of superhuman telepaths created by his sedative ephemerol (designed for pregnant women) are capable of creating an era of a new renaissance in human society.

He simultaneously gathers unto himself the guilt of having created them, clutching it to himself like a treasure. He seems to ignore the strong possibility that the Scanners may not have been created by ephemerol, but were, like Nola Carveth's monsters, released by his action. It is no accident that the beginning of the "scan tone" heard on the soundtrack when one of the Scanners unleashes his power sounds uncannily like the creaking open a huge iron door, suggesting that, when the Scanners were created, it was not a deformation of the brain that created their power, but the unlocking of a cerebral region that is not part of the ten percent normally used by human beings.

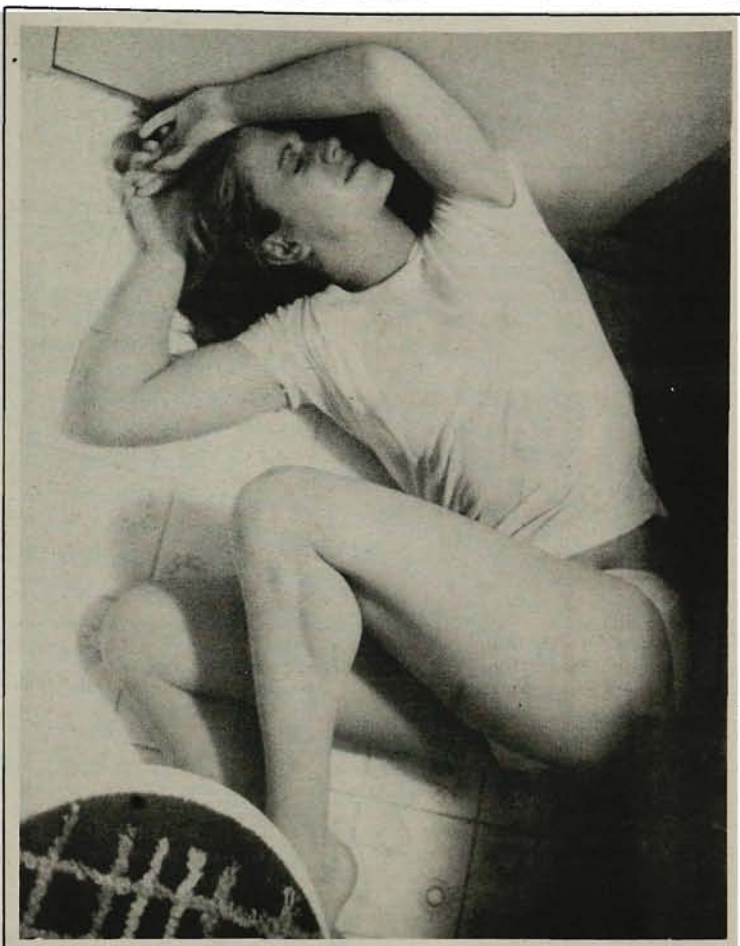
In a very real sense, both Cameron Vale and Darryl Revok in *Scanners* and *The Brood* are children of rage, one set released chemically and the other through pure mental coercion. This is quite different from the artificial telepaths in *Stereo*, who were created surgically and locked into symbiotic and intense telepathic relationships during their stay at the Canadian Academy for Erotic Research, where Luther Stringfellow's motto is "If there can be no love between the researcher and the subject, there can be no experiment."

Intriguingly, the created telepaths in both films develop pathological symptoms - an inability to deal with the flood of information received by their minds and a tendency towards self-destruction (both Darryl Revok and one of the telepaths in *Stereo* drilled holes in their foreheads to relieve the pressure created by having all those voices in their heads).

Of course, Dr. Ruth is not merely a metaphoric father to Vale and Revok, but their literal father (in the absence of a physically present mother, his oddly bi-sexual name with its masculine pre-name and feminine surname, suggest that they were not mothered at all, the same way that Nola Carveth's brood has no literal father), their competition is not merely between the dream and the nightmare of a Scanner society, but shot through with sibling rivalry and an increasingly Oedipal relationship with the father. In addition, Ruth's association with the Scanner program at Comsec suggests a domineering father unwilling to admit to the adulthood of his children, and thus Revok's rebellion is as Oedipal an action as Nola Carveth's responsibility for the death of her own mother (who is responsible for Nola's rage, in an endless circle of guilt).

The sleep of reason breeds monsters - and in *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood* and *Scanners*, the monsters function in a world of appetite, desire and murder that is the absolute reverse of the rationality that led to their creation.

Yet from these films, it is difficult to understand in precisely what direction Cronenberg is moving. His overtly Cartesian concerns, and his fascinated horror at the spectacle of physical decay are quite evident. While the technological aspect of scientific intervention is present, it is not nearly as evident as it will become in his most recent film, *Videodrome*, which finally comes face to face with the concern that is at the heart of Cronenberg's world - the interface between the human and the inhuman, between biology and other sciences.



● The body as high-tech: Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid*

The evolution of man as a technological animal: *Videodrome*

If *Videodrome* is David Cronenberg's masterpiece, it is because its narrative confusion and profusion conceals a driven, inexorable logic. Max Renn, a Toronto television entrepreneur with a taste for the bizarre (mostly prime-time sex and violence), discovers a strange television program that features nothing but torture and murder emanating from Pittsburgh. He assigns his in-house video pirate, Harlan, to discover the location of the signal and a sales agent to buy it.

What he does not realize is that implanted in the signal is an encoded message that works directly on his brain, leading to massive, hyperrealistic hallucinations and, eventually, physical mutation.

Investigating, he discovers a set of interlocking conspiracies involving *Videodrome* (the program) which is attempting to re-order the morality of society, and a counter-conspiracy led by Bianca O'Blivion (daughter of Brian O'Blivion, who created *Videodrome*), attempting to liberate society and move man into a higher state of evolution through integration with the machinery and content of television.

Locked inside what Cronenberg has called the "paranoid inventiveness" of Max Renn, we watch as he may or may not commit murder, may or may not have a video program inserted into a strange, vagina-like organ that develops in his stomach.

The inexorable logic of *Videodrome* is that the illusion is the reality, and when dealing with a medium as insidious as television, it doesn't make any difference which is which. One can interpret the narrative in any way, and find no textual

clues to deny it. Is Nikki Brand, the radio personality with whom Renn falls in love, an agent or a victim of *Videodrome*? Is Bianca O'Blivion an enemy of *Videodrome* or part of a struggle for power within the conspiracy who is using Renn to eliminate her rivals?

David Cronenberg Filmography

Shorts

Transfer 16 mm color
From the Drain 16 mm color
The Italian Machine
Secret Weapons

Features

Stereo (1969) 65 min. 35 mm B & W
Crimes of the Future (1970) 65 min. 35 mm color
Shivers (1975) 35 mm, 87 min. p.c. Dal Productions Can. dist. Cinépix (US title: *They Came From Within*; Quebec title: *The Parasite Murders*)
Rabid (1976), 35 mm, 90 min. dist. Cinépix
Fast Company (1978) 35 mm, 93 min. p.c. Michael Leibowitz, sc. Cronenberg with Phil Savath, Courtney Smith
The Brood (1979) 35 mm p.c. Mutual Films/Elgin International dist. New World-Mutual (Can), New World Pictures (US)
Scanners (1980) 35 mm, 105 min. p.c. Filmplan International dist. New World-Mutual (Can), Avco Embassy (US)
Videodrome (1981) 35 mm, 88 min. p.c. Filmplan Int'l dist. (Can., US & Eng.) Universal Pictures.

Max Renn's suicide - the final scene of the film - is equally ambiguous. What leads him to suicide is the promise of rebirth into a more highly evolved state (the next stage in the evolution of man as a technological animal) but there is no guarantee, which suggests that Renn, whose dying words are "Long live the new flesh," may be the first martyr of a new religion.

One of the most interesting elements of *Videodrome* is the fact that while there is overtly evil activity for the first time (Barry Convex and Harlan are explicitly turning Max into a monster that they can direct), it is also the first time that the victim is a witting accomplice in his own destruction. Were Max Renn not interested in the pornographic violence that his television station peddles to the public, he would not be hooked into the *Videodrome* signal. Were he not fascinated by the changes happening in his own body, he would not continue to view the signal. While his first murders, those of his partners, is done under the compulsion of *Videodrome*, his second murders, of Harlan and Convex, are committed as acts of vengeance.

Despite its narrative and moral confusion, *Videodrome* serves to clarify the relationships of science to man, destruction and creation, man and society in the works of Cronenberg. There is little of good and evil in the world. There is accident and evolution, whereby creation can become destruction, villains become victims (often the first victims), and victims can turn the tables with frightening suddenness.

The linkage between science and evil is a perverse one, almost entirely separate from intention, and society is less important by far than individual morality. What anti-Cronenbergians, who attack his films on social grounds, fail to see is that his work is not so much about present society and its discontents but about alternative social structures based on our world.

It is an essentially visionary world that would be capable of arising from our own, and while Cronenberg publicly expresses his belief in man as a technological animal, (the bloody fear and mutant desires of the films are deeply ambivalent towards these changes). Science can create (or unleash) a new race of beings without knowing what those beings are capable of - and unaware of the potentials of that race for self-destruction. It is a world fully cognizant that every human endeavour, every human institution, and every human relationship is a two-edged sword, and that good turns to destruction in a blink of the eye. Cronenberg's *New World* is a world that reflects the incoherence of reality (explain, if you disagree, the logic to be found in mass murder, nuclear weapons, starvation, television, and bureaucracy) and thus strikes at the very heart of the way our world works. ●

Notes

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following people and organizations for providing the opportunity to review the films of David Cronenberg in the preparation of this article: Susan Kennedy of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. Admit One Video, Debi Weldon of New Cinema, Ilona Pokol of Cineplex Corp., and Virginia Kelly of United Artists Classics.

1. In Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, Tony Williams, and Robin Wood *The American Nightmare: Essays On the Horror Film*, Toronto, 1979.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24
3. *Ibid.*

A 20th Century Chocolate Cake is not a conventional Canadian feature film. It is a bizarre comedy about the absurdities of the 20th century where dreams don't come true. It revitalizes contemporary clichés and creates a recipe for the future. I produced, directed and edited the film. Gregory Van Riel wrote the screenplay, acted the lead role and co-produced the picture.

The docu-drama includes interviews with Montreal gossip columnist Thomas Schnurmacher; feats of strength by The Great Antonio, a 510-pound mass of raging man; a secretary who Xeroxes herself; a giant rabbit that dodges cars; an authentic male belly dancer; and anti-romance.

Essentially Greg and I put the film together with very little money. We recruited friends and friends of friends to shoot the entire film, which was shot on weekends and during summer months.

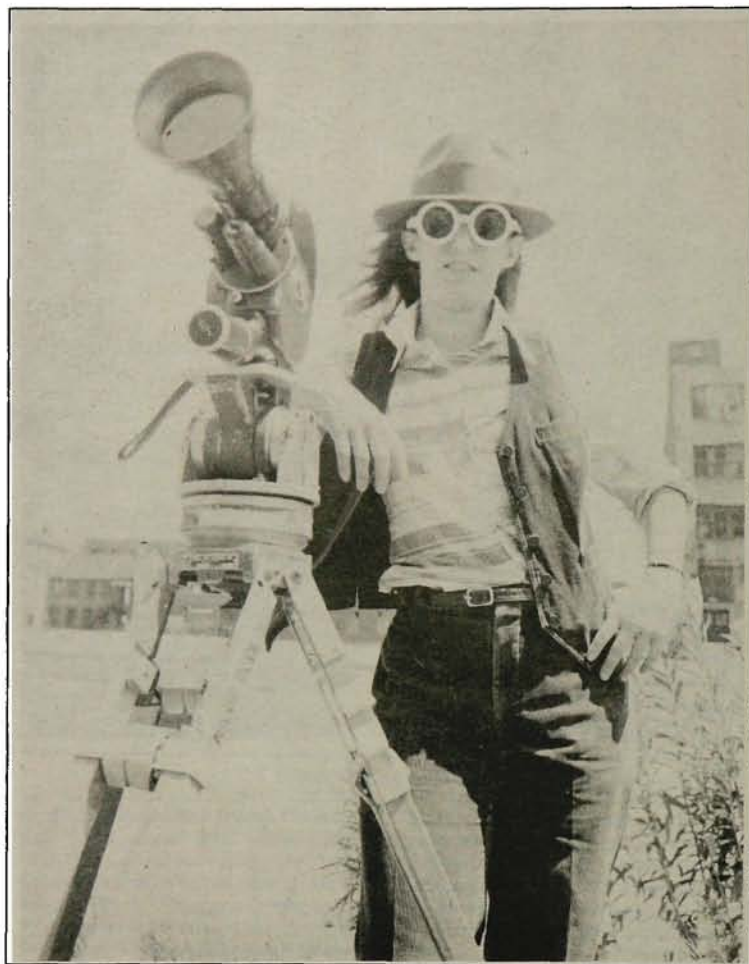
I met Greg at John Abbott College where I teach film and English and Greg was trying to be a student; in the '70s neither of those occupations was easy. Greg wasn't the typical John Abbott student. He was more aggressive, independent and less controllable. I found these traits attractive and took up the challenge of trying to work with him. We made a first "dramatic" film entitled *Recipe to Cook a Clown*, a rather loose scenario featuring Greg and Charles Fisch, Jr., another former student of mine. The film consisted of a series of vignettes - Greg meeting bizarre people in the city, a favorite theme of mine.

Somehow, we forgot the pain of making our first drama and decided to create another. Greg came up with a story about this schized-out 20th-century youth who goes around the city with a tape recorder interviewing people on the street. I loved the idea of interviewing people candidly. The most spontaneous material came from children: there's a revealing sequence where a four-year-old boy tells us his father is in jail - suddenly his sister clobbers him with her fist, and he quickly changes his story saying Daddy is in the South; obviously, just what he was told to say.

By now we were hooked. We had edited about 20 minutes of really interesting documentary footage, but there still wasn't a coherent story.

Greg would write all day and drive taxi at night, while I'd teach school during the day, then edit at night. At about 12 midnight we'd meet at a bar downtown to discuss the scenes and

Montreal filmmaker Lois Siegel is currently scripting, with Gregory Van Riel, the sequel to A 20th Century Chocolate Cake, A 21st Century Lobotomy. She is also shooting a half-hour documentary on Albinos.



The baking of a chocolate cake

by Lois Siegel

plan the next weekend's shoot. We enlisted Charles Fisch, Jr. from *Recipe* to play an alter-ego to Greg, as well as the very charismatic Jeannine Laskar, who had never acted in films before, to play a mysterious lady.

One night I received a strange call in

broken English with an Italian accent: "Gregory, he in jail." I freaked out - we were to shoot the next day, and Greg was in the scene. "Where?" I shouted in panic. "Gregory, he said you would know." And the lady hung up. I spent the next four hours on the phone calling

every jail in the city trying to find Greg. Finally I reached him. "Greg, what happened?" "Oh, they picked me up for an expired taxi license. I'll be out by tomorrow - I'm having a great time. There's all these weird people in here. I'm interviewing them, doing research..."

Despite tremendous efforts to finish the film, *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake*, started in 1978, was still being shot in 1980. One of the most elaborate scenes involved PJ's Cabaret, one of the more liberal-minded bars in the city - a place where both gays and straights mingle without hostility. M.C. Armand Monroe was fantastic in helping us achieve an authentic look. The week before we shot, he announced to the regular clientele that we were in pursuit of extras for the film. People from all over the city showed up at 8 a.m. Sunday morning to be in the scene: rockers, a leather man, punks, the Queen of England - it looked like Halloween. One girl was even let out of Douglas Hospital for the day to be in the film, and stripper Fonda Peters showed up practically naked. (She subsequently became Linda Lee Tracy of *Not A Love Story* fame).

Our new cameraman that day, Peter Benison, who actually was a real cameraman, shooting normal features and commercials, flew in from Toronto at the last minute for the PJ's shoot. Peter had been in Toronto shooting *Death Ship* the day before and had missed his plane back to Montreal. The only flight available was to Ottawa where he prearranged to rent a car when the plane arrived at 1 a.m. But when Peter landed in Ottawa, there was no car and the rental office was closed, shut tight for the night. Wisely, Peter had written down the name of the owner of the rental office and after waking up half of Ottawa asking for a Mr. Johnson, Peter finally found him (imagine calling anyone after 9 p.m. in Ottawa) and coaxed the man, with the threat of ruining a multi-million dollar picture, to get out of bed and come down to the airport and give him a car.

It was 5 a.m. when Peter arrived in Montreal... and he was on the set two hours later. We pried his eyes open, fed them some coffee and glued them to the camera eyepiece. Then Peter proceeded to shoot one of the most superb scenes in *Chocolate Cake*.

Charles did his belly dance, and I post-dated some cheques into oblivion so we could look at the rushes. Bellevue Pathe Laboratory was great. Everytime a cheque would bounce they'd merely call me, and I'd post-date a few more cheques. I was always about three months behind.

Then Greg came into an inheritance - a "Flower-Powered Geek Mobile." Scriptwriter Edith Rey (*Babe, The Armoured Man*) had been working on the film

Tomorrow Never Comes, directed by Peter Collinson. As a going away present Edith was given the car which was completely covered with painted daisies. Greg took one look at the car and flipped: "I gotta have that car for our movie!" Edith gave him the car. So now we had a car covered with daisies. People looked at us like we were crazy as we did highway shots and stunts: the Geek in the country, the Geek in the city, the Geek in the morning, the Geek at night, the Geek going the wrong way on the Trans-Canada Highway service road, dodging shocked little red Volkswagens...

I only spent money on film stock and processing and hustled everything else. I took care of equipment, crew and transportation. Greg took care of actors, accessories and locations. Every week Greg would approach another delicatessen on Ste. Catherine Street for catering so that we could feed our crew. We'd trade a credit in the film for food, props and beer. Our credit list is about five miles long, not unlike that in *Superman*. Greg would often secure a location by offering the manager of the place a part in the film.

By the end of the shoot we had used 10 cameramen, 10 sound men, 10 different cameras, and most of the film was shot on outdated 'short ends' - some only 40 feet long. Once I received some outdated film from a group of women who wanted to make a porno film, but who never got around to it...

We got to the point where we'd offer assistant cameramen the honor and opportunity of shooting part of our film if they would supply the film stock. I'd often find film cans pushed through the mail slot when I awoke in the morning.

Then we scripted an insane skit in a gas station with Stephen Lack and Peter Brawley of *Montreal Main* and *Rubber Gun* fame. Brawley played a vindictive mechanic who completely dismantles Stephen's handsome car. We interviewed Thomas Schnurmacher about why people love gossip, then we added The Great Antonio (one of Montreal's famous street people, renown for pulling four buses at a time on chains through downtown). Enlisting The Great Antonio's services was not an easy task. He didn't have a phone and could only be reached by leaving a message at the restaurant where he had breakfast. After weeks of calling, we arranged to meet him at his apartment in Montreal East to try to convince him to be in our film. He wasn't very impressed by us because there weren't any real 'super stars' in *Chocolate Cake*.

He pulled out hundreds of photos of himself posing with famous stars: snaps of him hovering over Alain Delon, Liza Minelli, Lee Majors, etc. He wouldn't appear in a film unless there was a big star featured. Finally I said, "O.K., listen. Tom Jones is in tonight. If I take a picture of you with Tom Jones, will you be in our film". Antonio said, "What do you want me to do?" We filmed him the next day.

Broke again, I applied for a couple more charge cards and put all my cash into the film. Then I figured out how to obtain two Master Cards. By this time I had started another film: a documentary entitled *Extreme Close-Up*, about multi-handicapped, young adults who have one handicap in common - blindness. Since I was putting money into two films, my funds were low. Eventually Master Card discovered my two accounts and blew their top. I spent one whole day answering hysterical phone calls



● Dance of the Veils: Linda Lee Tracy (aka Fonda Peters) in a scene from *Chocolate Cake*

because their system had gone wrong, and no one could cope with the idea of a customer having two cards under the same name. Finally a guy from the head office called me at school, and we had a great conversation. I explained to him how anything was possible within a large system - the larger the easier, and I taught him how to obtain two accounts. Then I told him about my films and said I would send him a cheque immediately, but by the end of the conversation everything had reversed, and he told me not to worry, everything was all right, I didn't have to send him any money...

The second summer was almost over, but we still had a few shots left to shoot with the Geek mobile. Unfortunately, the car brakes had given out - so Greg approached stuntman Marcel Fournier about fixing the car. Fortunately, Marcel just happened to be looking for such a crazy car. He was hired to perform the stunts for CTV's *National Driving Test* and needed a 'punk car.' We traded it for a brake job. Marcel fixed the brakes, we

shot the next day and delivered the car that night to Bienville, Québec. Then Greg and I were hired to play the parts of punk kids who get smashed up in the punk car in *National Driving Test*. It was the first time I saw myself killed on television.

Next, we got the idea of having a rough-tough motorcycle lady pick up Charles who was hitchhiking in one scene. But where do you find motorcycle 'Hells-Angels' type ladies?

Greg and I went down to the tough side of town - Pointe St. Charles - and discovered a bike shop on Wellington Street. Looking like the Bobbsey Twins on Sunday, we smiled at several mean-looking characters who were polishing their brass knuckles and omnivorous tatoos. We asked whether they knew any motorcycle ladies. Surprisingly, they kindly made a phone call and within a half-hour, up pulled the biggest purple Harley-Davidson we'd ever seen in our lives - driven by our motorcycle lady. Everything was set. The day of the shoot

she brought her boyfriend, "Tiny," along. He was about 6'5" and as wide as he was tall. His Harley Davidson made his girlfriend's bike look like a tricycle. He watched over the production to see that we didn't take advantage of his lady, and we tried to keep from looking scared.

Everyone we knew became an extra in *Chocolate Cake*. When a crew member wasn't shooting, he was enlisted as an actor. It was like musical chairs. Everyone constantly changed roles. During one scene the electrician became the assistant director, the soundman helped with the lighting, I set up the tripod, and everyone was constantly over-involved and therefore happy. Sometimes people would even cancel their paying jobs to work with us. If an extra ended up on the cutting-room floor, we'd try to use that person in another scene at a later date.

Filmmaking became a way of life. We were so involved that sometimes we lost sight of what was happening. For instance, Greg wrote a scene about the main character of *Chocolate Cake* who decided to be a dog trainer. The scene included an encounter with a ferocious, man-eating German Shepherd. That was before he found himself on location playing the part of that guy. When he saw the huge, growling beast tearing and tugging at the strong leather leash of the trainer, he definitely had second thoughts about acting at that moment.

But we always went ahead anyway. Logic and reason weren't in the script, and we certainly weren't going to write them in.

By now we were into year three, and all those little details that crop up when re-shooting a film had to be straightened out. Haircuts had to match, weight had to be lost or gained. The dry cleaners lost a pair of pants from Greg's wardrobe, and somehow we had to find a matching pair that belonged to a suit which was bought in Nairobi, Kenya. Montreal shopkeepers told us to forget it.

Then I read this lovely story in a newspaper about a secretary who Xeroxed her rear-end for a party invitation and was consequently fired. Of course, I had to recreate the scene for *Chocolate Cake*.

Filmpian International Inc., a company which makes features, agreed to let us use their Xerox machine on a Saturday morning. We never had so many requests to work on a scene.

Then we arranged to shoot a fight scene at a heavy bar near St. Lawrence Street. We got permission to shoot on a Sunday, and O'Keefe donated about 15 cases of beer for the cast and crew. But the barman decided to make some extra cash and started selling the free beer to all the extras. By the time we needed the extras for the fight scene, everyone was drunk. The bartender had been drinking for 12 hours when it came time for him to say his lines. His contribution to the film is most unusual.

Now, towards the end of year four, *Chocolate Cake* is finally scheduled to appear. It will have its world premiere at the Monkland Theatre, June 1, at 9 p.m. in Montreal. Thanks to finishing assistance from the National Film Board of Canada, the cake is finally out of the oven.

Stories about the baking of the *Cake* could go on forever. Obviously *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake* is not your average slick, commercial film, but it is just about everything else. It's a 20th-century adventure in which one learns to accept the world - absurd as it is.

● Fired for photocopying her rear-end, ex-secretary Lucie Tétrault recreates the event

