

FILM REVIEWS

David Cronenberg's Fast Company

d. David Cronenberg, 1st asst. d. James Kaufman, 2nd asst. d. Jim Long, sc. Phil Savath, Courtney Smith, David Cronenberg, original story Alan Treen, dial. & effects ed. Terry Burge, ph. Mark Irwin, 1st asst. camera Robin Miller, 2nd asst. camera Gary Armstrong, sp. effects Tom Fisher, ed. Ron Sanders, asst. ed. Arnie Stewart, racing ed. Bruce Carwardine, stunts Phil Adams, Mark Damien, asst. sd. ed. David Street, Arnie Stewart, Christopher Tate, sd. rec. Bryan Day, sd. re-rec. Terence Cooke, a.d. Carol Spier, boom Ken Pappes, crew Peter Von King, John Thomas, continuity Margaret Hanly, cost. Delphine White, properties Peter Lauterman, asst. props. Dave McAree, l.p. William Smith, John Saxon, Claudia Jennings, Nicholas Campbell, Don Francks, Cedric Smith, Judy Foster, George Buza, Robert Haley, David Petersen, exec. p. David M. Perlmutter, p. Michael Lebowitz, Peter O'Brian, Courtney Smith, p. manager Caryl Brandt, p. co-od. Sherry Cohen, p. sect. Linda Farmer, Linda Brestich, p.c. Michael Lebowitz Inc. (1979) col. 35mm, running time 93 minutes.

Fast Company is a film about drag-racing (shot in Alberta and the north-west U.S.) that's already been and gone through the drive-in and rural theatre circuits; perhaps under ordinary circumstances one wouldn't even notice it. But there's one circumstance about the film that isn't ordinary: it was directed by a man who is arguably the best filmmaker in English Canada today — David Cronenberg.

In the eyes of commentators anxious about the cultural respectability of Canadian cinema, Cronenberg is more an embarrassment than an asset to this country. As a maker of sleazy horror movies for the exploitation market (and, what's worse, movies that have consistently made money both here and abroad at a time when Canadian films are an iffy commercial proposition), he's often an object of the deepest suspicion for content-oriented critics. But **Shivers**, **Rabid** and **The Brood**, sensational horror films with a cool visual style and a melancholy, sometimes ironic, detachment, can all, in my opinion, take a confident place amongst the small handful of English-language movies that are both genuinely good and



Claudia Jennings as Sammy and William Smith as Lonnie Johnson star in *Fast Company*
photo: Warren Lipton

genuinely Canadian.

Cronenberg has always liked to build his projects from the ground up, conceiving and writing his films as well as directing them. Indeed, he's gone on record as saying that the most important ingredient of a movie is a good script — a surprising remark from someone who has the priceless gift of a controlled and incisive visual style. But one can see what he's getting at after looking at **Fast Company**, a film that he was brought into at the later stages to direct. Although Cronenberg receives a credit for the script (along with Phil Savath and Courtney Smith), **Fast Company** is all too clearly somebody else's basic idea. The scenario, which features a sympathetic group of racing-car drivers and mechanics and their girlfriends pitted against the evil machinations of their corrupt corporate boss, is a witless collection of stale conventions. The characters exist only in the most stereotyped forms, and the action is motivated almost exclusively by the need to keep producing a series of two-dimensional confrontations.

Scant attention is paid to continuity and development in the storyline, and in particular the behavior of the villain seems dictated by no logic or consistency other than the desire of the scriptwriters to keep him as nasty

as possible. Though parts of the script are inoffensive, and there are even one or two effective moments, I can confidently say that on the script level **Fast Company** is without any important redeeming qualities.

What interest the film does have lies entirely in Cronenberg's direction — to such an extent, indeed, that **Fast Company** can almost serve as a textbook example of the limited extent to which a director can salvage a really impossible project. Not surprisingly, the movie's main asset is its visual style — quiet, precise and straight-forward, with that element of neat, cool detachment that Cronenberg shares with directors like Monte Hellman, Terence Malick, and his gifted fellow-Canadians Don Shebib and Denys Arcand. Direction like this is the very reverse of the kind of flashy meretriciousness of **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**, and which has also raised its ugly head in, for example, Jack Nicholson's **Goin' South** and Jonathan Demme's **The Last Embrace**.

In any case, the best moments in **Fast Company** are those in which Cronenberg can free himself entirely of the dialogue and the characters — notably in the many superb scenes of cars being tuned up before races, of helmeted drivers' heads in the deafening roar of the cockpit, of mechanics lovingly dissect-

ing powerful machines in the workshop. As always, Cronenberg is aware of the power of images by themselves, without commentary or emphasis: so much can be shown that doesn't need to be, that *can't* be, explained in terms of words. This is the mark of the purest kind of filmmaker — a Hitchcock, an Ozu, a Bresson, a Rohmer — and if Cronenberg doesn't exactly occupy their exalted station, he is nevertheless of their fraternity.

Despite Cronenberg's gifts as evidenced in this film, though, I can't in good conscience recommend *Fast Company* with much enthusiasm to anyone but dedicated students of the art of cinema, since the banality of the scenario can never be disguised for long. Better far to pay another visit to *Shivers*, *Rabid*, or *The Brood* — truly accomplished expressions of perhaps the most imaginative vision in Canadian films today.

Bill Beard

David Cronenberg's The Brood

d. David Cronenberg, asst. d. John Board, Libby Bowden, sc. David Cronenberg, dial. ed. Brian Holland, asst. dial. ed. Lois Tupper, ph. Mark Irwin, ed. Allan Collins, asst. ed. Carol Zeifman, sd. Bryan Day, boom Tom Mather, sd. ed. Peter Burgess, asst. sd. ed. Jeremy Maclaverty, sd. re. rec. Joe Grimaldi, a.d. Carol Spier, set dec. Angelo Stea, m. Howard Shore, cost. Delphine White, continuity Nancy Eagles, make-up Shonagh Jabour, l.p. Oliver Reed, Samantha Eggar, Art Hindle, Cindy Hinds, Nuala Fitzgerald, Henry Beckman, Susan Hogan, Michael Magee Gary McKeehan, Bob Silverman, Joseph Shaw, Felix Silla, John Ferguson, Larry Solway, Rainer Schwartz, Nicholas Campbell, exec. p. Pierre David, Victor Solnicki, p. Claude Heroux, p.asst. Maureen Fitzgerald, Bob Wertheimer, p. manager Gwen Iveson, p. secretary Trudy Work, p.c. The Brood Inc., col. 35mm, (year) 1978, running time 92 minutes.

There are these basic, common fears: mutilation, dying and the malevolent unknown. There are the surefire mechanics of suspense, shock and gore. Even a novice filmmaker can manipulate them for a strong, gut-level response. In the audience, we need not think or even learn the names of our fears, we will react anyway. Total titillation. Walk home with nothing more horrifying

than the dregs of an adrenalin rush. It's fun and profitable. It's what's being done in *Alien*, *Prophecy* and *Halloween*. It's what David Cronenberg did in *Shivers* and *Rabid*. It's *not* what he's doing in *The Brood*.

A few horror films, *The Innocents*, *Psycho*, *The Tenant*, work on the head and the heart: a definition of 'grotesque', by John Ruskin, "...the expression in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truth..." Usually, the truth expressed concerns the inner landscape of one or more characters. Imagination gives understanding. Understanding awakens pity and terror for a condition that may have nothing to do with one's own fears. It can be a very instructive horror.

Cronenberg structures *The Brood* and engages the imagination with a series of mysteries. What is the dangerous flaw in Dr. Raglan's radical therapy, Psychoplasemics? Who or what is murdering the people that Nola Carveth, Dr. Raglan's star patient, hates? How are the murders and the therapy connected? These fuel the action and encourage us to look for clues, to try and beat Cronenberg to the punchline. But, while we're doing it, he's feeding us scenes that lead to an awareness of a second, unstated mystery. Is Nola Carveth really crazy? If so, what are the causes and forms of her madness?

The climax of the film links the two sets of mysteries and satisfies the demands of the plot (and the audience) in as gruesome a manner as could be wished. It also reveals the title creatures as reflections of Nola. These reflections spark others: Nola's daughter as a reflection of her, Nola as a reflection of her mother, her ex-husband, Frank, as Nola's father. This is what sparks our understanding of Nola's inner life and the causes of her disturbance.

The success of the reflections depends on the clarity of the character sketches that precede them. Nola's mother, Juliana, is given like this: We see Nola in therapy, claiming her mother beat her as a child. Is she telling the truth, or as the plot suggests, is she making a distorted confession to beating her own daughter? Cut to Nola's mother babysitting Nola's daughter. She's getting primly drunk. Her behavior with the child suggests nothing so much as a little girl playing grown-up. An old photo shows Nola sick in a hospital bed, while Juliana's bright smile for the camera is a clear denial of her daughter's in-

jury. Her comments — that she *never could* find out why Nola kept waking up cut and bruised — show that twenty years later, she's still dying.

Anyone familiar with newspaper stories on the subject, will recognize in Juliana a typical, abusing parent. To Cronenberg's undying credit, nobody stands up and spells this out for us. Child abuse is not a fashionable subject to be exploited for thrills and cheap moralizing in *The Brood*, it merely happens to be one of the central concerns of the story.

There are holes in the presentation of the other characters. We learn, for instance, that Nola married Frank for his sanity, but we never learn why he married her. We never see how Nola interacts with her daughter. These holes, with one exception, fog the reflections of the climax only slightly. The one exception is Dr. Raglan. We're told he is a prominent and respectable psychiatrist, but this image is destroyed when, in one afternoon, he callously evicts all his highly unstable, highly dependent, live-in patients. This makes him the unfeeling mad scientist, but the climax destroys that image and paints him as the dedicated and caring therapist. None of this chaos is cleared up by the casting and acting of Oliver Reed in the role. His arrogant thug aura is fun to watch, but does nothing to raise Dr. Raglan above the level of plot device. Despite this, Dr. Raglan's fate is wholly appropriate to his place in the story and a snappy comment on the practice of radical psychiatry.

There are a few other flaws in the script — a therapy scene that's a bit too long and a bit too flat and a couple of scenes with detectives that are pure exposition — but none of these detract from the effectiveness of the film. Cronenberg handles the suspense well. The middle of the babysitting sequence, which has begun calmly enough, is the beginning of the killer's approach, a suspense sequence which ends, and ends the babysitting sequence, in bloody murder. The murders, themselves, are fine set-pieces of bizarre composition, sharp cutting and brutal action. The special effects are grisly and convincing.

Mark Irwin's lighting and photography create a world of thick, normal surfaces and suggest, without resorting to distortion tactics, the ugly, unacknowledged passions beneath. It's an atmosphere ideally suited to the story and characters and that seems, quite natur-

ally and unself-consciously, to be very Canadian.

Of the performances in *The Brood*, only Michael Magee's as Inspector Mrazek, seems wrong. Art Hindle is convincing as a low-key, unemotional man coping with his fears and his deep love for his daughter in a low-key, unemotional way. Samantha Eggar as Nola treads the fine line between the obviously sane and the obviously insane with sympathetic and eerie effect. Nuala Fitzgerald shows all the tension, fear and self-deception in Nola's mother. The best performance, though, comes from Bob Silverman as a victim of Dr. Raglan's methods. The part is small

and mostly comic. Silverman milks his lines for all they're worth and gets more laughs from bits of business. At the same time his bitterness and obsessions make him a menacing figure constantly on the verge of losing control. He's like one of those eccentrics who used to inhabit *The Avengers* in the days of Emma Peel, but much more effective.

The Brood closed in Toronto in less than a month. I suspect its potential audiences were more interested in *Alien* and *Prophecy*. But in twenty years, when they're long forgotten, *The Brood* will be a television and revival showing favourite and just as enjoyable then as now.

Andrew Dowler

Theodore J. Flicker's Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang

d. Theodore J. Flicker, asst.d. Mireille Goulet, Pierre Poirier, sc. Theodore J. Flicker, casting Howard Rysphan, ph. Francois Protat, camera op. Allen C. Smith, sp.ph.effects Michael Albrechtson, sup.ed. Stan Cole, sd. Ken Helley-Ray, sd.ed. Patrick Drummond, Ellen Adams, continuity Monique Champagne, a.d. Seamus Flannery, m. Lewis Furey, cost. Francois Barbeau, makeup Marie-Angele Protat, Diane Simard, l.p. Stephen Rosenberg, Alex Karras, Guy L'Ecuyer, Joy Coghill, Claude Gai, Earl Pennington, Victor Desy, Marfa Richler, Thor Bishopric, Yvon Leroux, Basil Fitzgibbon, Walter Massey, Jill Frappier, Nan Stewart, Deena Baikowitz, Ainsley Robertson, John Wildman, Kirsten Bishopric, Marc Goldstein, Geoffrey Kramer, Stephanie Brandman, Peter Tanaka, Ryan Campbell, Rona Sinclair, exec.p. John Flaxman, p. Harry Gulkin, p.manager Mychele Boudrias, p.c. Gulkin Productions, (year) 1976, col. 35mm, running time 80 minutes, dist. Gulkin Productions/Saguenay Films.

In recent years, feature films made for a children's audience or "family films," as the industry likes to call them, have been something of a graveyard for directors. The 1976 version of *The Blue Bird*, directed by elder statesman George Cukor, was disparaged and ignored. Bryan Forbes, who had a reputation as a sensitive maker of films with youngsters, saw that reputation damaged when *International Velvet* — even with Tatum O'Neal — did



Stephen Rosenberg who plays Jacob Two-Two awaits the verdict that will sentence him to children's prison

so badly that M.G.M. would not even release figures on it. To be sure, the stature of Walt Disney Productions remains high, but now it largely rests on their past triumphs and the occasional (for them) innovative idea like *Freaky Friday*. By and large, however, the output from Disney is so trivial that even such traditionally favorable observers like Judith Ripp of *Parents' Magazine* have taken the studio to task for their shallowness. In spite of this, these films continue to do good business, for fairly obvious reasons:

they enable parents to send their kids to the movies without the moral qualms that attend even so innocent a film as *Star Wars*, and they enable exhibitors to make a killing on the concessions.

Once in a while, though, a film does come along which tries to be entertaining for children and has some artistic pretensions as well. Such a picture was Alan Parker's *Bugsy Malone* which, in spite of its kinky overtones, was really just a game of dress-up carried to a logical conclusion, made for a generation which, because of television, is more cinematically literate than its predecessors. And *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* should have had a similar effect and have made a fair bid to become a classic in the manner of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. That the Harry Gulkin-Ted Flicker production is not really up to those standards is a disappointment, but perhaps understandable in the light of the troubles that have surrounded it.

The story of the "repatriation" of Mordecai Richler's best selling children's novel has already been told (*Cinema Canada*, No. 31), and the further problems which Harry Gulkin encountered may be summarized briefly. The American distributor, Cinema Shares, lost interest in *Jacob Two-Two* after some negative test screenings in 1977 and, for the next year or so, stories appeared telling of how the producer was trying, without much success, to find an alternative source to handle it. With 1979 designated as International Year of The Child, Gulkin decided to do it himself, and in March opened the film at Montreal's Snowdon Theatre. Soon, the cast-off film was outdrawing Disney's *The North Avenue Irregulars*. That was enough for Saguenay Films to pick it up.

As finally released, the film, at 80 minutes in length, is able to avoid the extraneous padding that often causes family films to sprawl unnecessarily. Jacob (Stephen Rosenberg), a two-plus-two-plus-two-year-old who has to say everything twice because no one listens to him the first time, falls asleep in Mount Royal Park after running away from a grocer (Earl Pennington) who threatens to have him arrested for insulting an adult. In his dream, he finds himself before Mr. Justice Rough, (also played by Pennington), and a jury-cum-choir which sings platitudes at him ("It's for your own good...



La Presse's Paris correspondent Bernard Robitaille masked as Richard Nixon faces off with director Michael Rubbo masked as Valery Giscard D'Estaing

to the documentary genre. Rubbo is different. He appears an open filmmaker interested in culture and politics, and above all in film. Rubbo shares with the unit B filmmakers (Colin Low, Wolf Koenig, Tom Daley) a playfulness and an aesthetic delight in the medium. His films have the humor of *Lonely Boy*, the sense of social responsibility of *Back-Breaking Leaf* and the commitment to entertain, even in as dry a subject as astronomy (the NFB film *Universe*).

Now, to the case at hand, Michael Rubbo's latest film, *Solzhenitsyn's Children Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris* (1979). The title is as double-edged as the subject matter. One almost expects a tour of the political sandboxes of Paris or the discovery of a new wave of "flower children" emanating from Truffaut's cultural garden. Instead Rubbo presents us with an update on the upset of the state of political philosophy in Paris, where philosophy and politics have been mixed these past two centuries. Did you know that both Marx and Lenin spent significant time in the cafés of Paris?

Political philosophy is in itself a very non-visual subject for a film. Rubbo does all he can to respect the concepts but to humanize their delivery to us. First of all he, himself, stranger to Parisian politics, appears in the film. To introduce himself and us to the ideas and personalities, he takes as his guide,

Bernard Robitaille, Paris correspondent for the Montreal newspaper *La Presse*. And during the presidential election of 1977 — the first election in forty years to threaten France with a Leftist Government — he talks to the political thinkers of Paris, and he discovers why France will not have a Communist Government — there is a serious crisis in the Left. The Communists, the Maoists, the Leninists, all the factions of the left are undergoing an identity crisis, and Solzhenitsyn, his stature, his writing, his moral courage point to the heart of this crisis — the Russian experiment has not proved to be what it set out to be.

This rather simple observation may prove to be more revolutionary in its practical ramifications in world politics than the Revolution itself. (An exaggeration I make knowingly for dramatic effect.) The ripple effect from Paris outward is certain to touch us here in Canada where political and cultural identity could consequently blur even more.

Rubbo's approach is straightforward. He talks first to Jean Ellenstein, the philosopher of the French Communist Party. Communism in France is very different from the Russian experience. The French Communist Party believes in pluralism, in democracy. One by one, the victories of Communism are examined, via first hand participants. From Russia, the Jewish dissident, Victor

Feinberg. His protest of the invasion of Czechoslovakia was staged in Red Square. It lasted less than a minute. Beaten by KGB agents, he was taken away and institutionalized as insane. The "Cancer Ward" tries to cure all dissent in the USSR. Now in France, he is free. From Czechoslovakia proper, Rubbo interviews a former politician whose trial under Stalin foreshadowed the inevitability of the 1968 events in Czechoslovakia. If the Czechs could flirt with freedom, who would be next? Perhaps the Russian people themselves.

In one of the last interviews in the film Rubbo speaks, or rather is spoken to by Bernard Henri-Levy, the key man among the new philosophers, the young political thinkers who are attempting to turn France away from the Left. (Very reminiscent of the revival of Conservatism, neo-Conservatism as it is called in the United States.) Levy is ascetic, in black and white with his sand colored furniture. Austere and rather hypnotic. He identifies strongly with Solzhenitsyn's artistic power and moral courage. The Gulag ended all preconceptions about Communism. French Communism is not exempt. It is as great a threat to Democracy as is the Russian experience. But in France "the Barbarism," as he calls French Communism, wears a new face, but it remains what it always was.

French Communism and Russian Communism are not alone in coming under critical scrutiny. Rubbo and Robitaille speak to the authors of a book praising Maoist China. Having spent two years in China consequent to their first book, they wrote a second book condemning the Maoist experience. "The Enemy is From Within." They condemn the control the Communist Party holds over all aspects of life in China. If you want to marry, you have to ask permission of the local Party Committee. If you want to have a child, the Committee will tell you, if and when. There is no freedom of choice.

And onward to the other experiments in the Communist ideal — Vietnam, Cuba, Cambodia. Each in its turn is condemned in spite of Rubbo's own kind words about his Cuban experience. Each has become far from ideal. Each Communist State has created its own Gulag.

The reader might conclude that Rubbo's film is an anti-Communist tract. No at all. It is a film about disaffection of Communists with Communism as it exists. In this sense it is a disturbing

it hurts us more than it hurts you"). He is sentenced to two years, two months, two days, two hours and two minutes in the infamous Children's Prison on Slimers' Island ("from which no brats return"). In the custody of the scaly Master Fish (Guy L'Ecuyer) and the beak-nosed Mistress Fowl (Joy Coghill), he is taken to meet the warden, the Hooded Fang (Alex Karras), a roaring former wrestler who determines to break the boy of his duplicative habit. However, Jacob, with the aid of the representatives of Child Power, The Intrepid Shapiro (Marfa Richler) and The Fearless O'Toole (Thor Bishopric), is able to discover that the terrible creature is himself quite the child, and so is able to liberate the small prisoners.

It is to Ted Flicker's credit that he does not try to embroider this fairly simple fable and its message that the sensitivities of children should be respected, with any great flashiness, even if it does mean a rather uncinematic reliance on Richler's essentially verbal humor. Where he does use effects, it is with restraint, as in the trial scene, where Francois Protat's low angle photography heightens Jacob's feeling of insignificance before the implacable Adult Law. The design of the Children's Prison, though it could be criticized for looking too artificial, is a suitable surreal experience for a child exposed to animated cartoons and television commercials, while the jeans-and-jersey uniforms of Child Power form a link to Jacob's siblings' games in the prologue (again, the same persons double the roles), and the comic heroes they (and Richler) dote on. The only effect that really does not work is the gray makeup on the child prisoners, which makes them look uncomfortably like Romerian zombies.

Since the film is so verbal, Flicker and Gulkin were fortunate to be able to get the ideal person to play Jacob in Stephen Rosenberg. Neither too cute, nor too clever, he is justification enough for having the film made in Montreal, when one considers how a Disney child like Sean Marshall or a "personality" like Jimmy Osmond would have done it had it been shot in California as originally planned. Thor Bishopric and especially Marfa Richler (daughter of Mordecai) are outstanding among the 200 or so Montreal area children who appear alongside Stephen. Of the adult characters, the Judge, Master Fish, Mistress Fowl and

Mister Fox (Claude Gai), the head guard and saboteur of toys, are all creations worthy of Lewis Carroll. But Alex Karras is much too broad in his characterization of the Hooded Fang to be either menacing or pitiful, and this is a major weakness in Flicker's treatment.

By far, the greatest problem with *Jacob Two-Two*, aside from the Slime Squad, is in the variable quality of the sound. Some voices like the children's and Alex Karra's are relatively clear, but others like Guy L'Ecuyer's and Victor Desy's (who is not well used as the hapless lawyer Louis Loser), are almost hopelessly blurred. The songs are impossible to understand, and Lewis Furey, in an attempt to be gentle and innocent, winds up sounding like Cat Stevens instead.

Michael Rubbo's Solzhenitsyn's Children Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris

d. Michael Rubbo, special collaboration Louis-Bernard Robetaille, sc. and narr. Michael Rubbo, ph. Andraes Poulsson, adnl.ph. Michael Edols, Michel Thomas-D'hoste, asst.camera Serge Lafortune, ed. Michael Rubbo, asst.ed. Stephan Steinhouse, loc.sd. Joseph Champagne, sd.ed. Andre Galbrand, asst.by Danuta Klis, re rec. Jean Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll, unit admin. Janet Preston, exec.p. Arthur Hammond, p. Marrin Canell, p.c. The National Film Board, (year) 1979, col. 16mm, running time 87 minutes, 21 seconds.

While the rest of the world is struggling with its own changing nature, and the attendant angst and excitement, we, here in Canada, are looking for heroes. In no area is the search more intense than in the media. Media and culture, the right hand and the left, scrutinize and are scrutinized. Film is no exception. Indeed there is an implicit certainty in some circles that if Canada develops a feature film industry all will be well in this land.

That is quite a responsibility for the cultural artifact, the film, and for its maker. Think of it. A film is made, finally screened, on television or in a

It should not be thought that the film of *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* is a disaster, for the large audiences of children that have seen it during the matinee-only-screenings which Gulkin arranged as an interesting experiment that also saves money, are quite attentive to the story. There is little of the restlessness that is usual in the auditoriums when Disney films play. But there is also too little of the excitement found in the book. It would seem that the familiar problems of lack of time, money and co-ordination continue to bedevil the attempts of Canadian filmmakers like Harry Gulkin to translate literature into cinema.

J. Paul Costabile

theatre. It's like a sheep slaughtered at Delphi — inwards to be examined and analysed for portents of portents. First glimpse must reveal Canadian content. A sigh of relief then with the work of a Peter Pearson. Mine it, mine it for deep meaning. It is after all certifiably a national product. Very self-conscious. Often self-righteous. What of the subtle, non-overtly Canadian work of Michael Rubbo? It doesn't take place in Canada. The ideas aren't Canadian in any particular way. No wonder. He's Australian. Yes, dismiss him. Well, he does work for the National Film Board. They're all aesthetes and Communists. They, he, are of no account.

This very process has, in the past, lost to us, great artists. John Grierson immediately comes to mind. It would be shameful, if the same attitude, prompted Michael Rubbo to leave Canada.

In the past ten years Rubbo is responsible for at least two films that can rightly claim and have received recognition beyond our borders, *The Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1971) about the Vietnamese interface with the West during the Vietnam War and *Waiting for Fidel* (1974) about an attempted interface between a Canadian capitalist and his guide, politician Joey Smallwood and Fidel Castro. In both films Rubbo, as narrator or visual participant has placed himself as filmmaker in the unusual position of explorer.

He admits interest, curiosity, sometimes bewilderment, but never the distant sophomoric or all-knowing sensibility that has in the past lent the label dogmatic, or more subtly, educational,

film, and in its way, a courageous film. Rubbo, by poking his camera into the entrails of contemporary political thought, de-mythologizes the canonized experiments in Communism. Whether they be Leninists or Maoists. Does that mean that Rubbo implies advocacy of Democracy? Does it mean that there are limits to the potential of Government involvement in the private life? Or is he asking the question, "Can we live with the anxiety democracy promotes in individuals?" His own behavior in the film suggests the latter is a possibility. Certainly the figure of Solzhenitsyn, what he stands for, is the only positive element in the film.

Which brings me back to Michael Rubbo, the National Film Board and the Canadian audience. This film was produced in Canada, and one can be very proud that such a film could be made in this country. The film is mature, probing and satisfying on an intellectual as well as aesthetic level. And yet there is a question about the life of this film here in Canada.

It is appalling to learn that this film has already been sold to PBS in the

United States and shown at the Film Forum in New York. It has yet to be shown here except for screenings at universities and at the Grierson Seminar in Orillia. They love Mike Rubbo in the U.S. and embrace his work. Apparently we don't. One doesn't know who we are, but we exist, because Rubbo's films have met a lot of resistance here in Canada. He sent the film to the U.S. first because he's had too much non-response to his films at the CBC and because his films are only routinely distributed via district offices of the NFB. Apparently the CBC is not alone. The film was raked over the coals at this year's Grierson Seminar.

This is very sad given the filmmaker and his work. Rubbo is a major artist. Perhaps the reason, to harken back to the beginning of this review, is his interest in international subject matter, lack of overt Canadian content. If this is so, the loss is ours. Next year Michael Rubbo will be filmmaker in residence at Harvard University in Boston.

Kenneth Dancyger

Diane Létourneau's Les Servantes du Bon Dieu

d. Diane Létourneau with the collaboration of the Petites Soeurs de la Sainte-Famille; resch. Diane Létourneau, sc. Louise Carrier, ph. Jean-Charles Tremblay, asst. ph. Pierre Duceppe, ed. Josée Beaudet, sd. Serge Beauchemin, lighting Jacques Paquet, lighting asst. Denis Hamel, p. Claude Godbout, Marcia Couëlle, p.c. Les Productions Prisma with la SDICC, Radio-Québec, and L'OTEO, col. 16mm, (year) 1978, running time 90.

In art, death is rarely represented as a peaceful closing of the eyes.

Diane Létourneau's 90 min. documentary *Les Servantes Du Bon Dieu* (The Handmaidens of God), filmed among the nuns of the convent of Saint-Famille in Sherbrooke, Québec, is above all a film about passing on. It is about a dying order of women. Their convent, established in the 1890s, now faces closure because the sisterhood cannot attract youthful recruits. The average age of the sisters of Saint-Famille is 60.

The film reveals the tranquility of their aging. No words, written or spok-



Two "petites" sisters of the Sainte-Famille
photo: Yves Ste-Marie

en, can transmit the humility and serenity we witness in the eyes and faces of the nuns whom we meet in this film. In

our jagged age, it is a provocative confrontation.

The sisters of Saint-Famille were organized and still function primarily as a domestic service organization for the priesthood. In the film we see them at their daily duties and dedications, laundering, cooking, cleaning. Theirs are simple lives, lived with deliberation and a good deal of humor.

No one could fail to be captivated by some of the spunky, guileless old ladies who make their debut in *Les Servantes du Bon Dieu*. One feisty octogenerian tells us that she adopted a black habit, when most of the others wear white, because she likes black, always has, then gets up and shuffles off camera. There is zest also to the two nuns who live in the garage, to be closer to the automobiles for which they are responsible, who we find in serious discussion about the relative merits of the Pontiac and Chevrolet!

The nuns are curiously natural, though sometimes shy in front of the camera. But it is the qualities we least expect to find among such women, namely their independence of mind and firm pride of vocation, that make them so attractive.

One senses that Létourneau was herself surprised by the personalities she encountered. Through a series of interviews, which we soon realize are of the same format (why did she join the convent, at what age, is her work satisfying?) we discover the wealth of character among the women living in this religious collectivity. The interviews also reveal something about conditions for Québec women early in the century when the choice of a religious vocation often meant the only access to a career and life outside the home. (Until the Quiet Revolution, religious societies had responsibility for education and health care in Quebec, and many women made prestigious careers in these areas.)

In the end, however, the repetition in the interviews becomes tedious, and works against the tension of discovery. The director's zealotry in one area underlines a curious gap in another.

On one level, Létourneau is fascinated by the simple satisfaction with which all the work in the convent is done. There are languid shots of hands meticulously folding linens and ladling soup, silent views of women at work dusting some part of the sanctuary. Yet when the cardinal, speaking for the priests to whom the service is rendered, says with uneasy dignity, that the first quality of the nuns is their faithfulness

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in service, we sense feminist indignation. The paradox comes when the director uncovers nothing but expressions of contentment among the nuns as labourers. If Létourneau meant to comment on church hierarchy and politics then it would have been more appropriate to treat the question of hierarchy within the convent itself. In fact, the day to day running of the convent, the people behind its apparently smooth operation, are never seen.

It is a priest, whose habit it is to ring for the dinner that the good nuns have prepared for him, who makes one of the telling comments on the experience Létourneau documents. Gently, he reminds us that these women face death without fear.

The final images of the film show the preparation of and closing of a coffin, and the procession of the sisterhood that accompanies it to the grave. It is rare footage, not only because cameras are usually foreign to even semi-cloistered convents, but because the audience

shares in the intimacy of the ritual.

A word should be said about the cinematography by Jean-Charles Tremblay, who has approached his task with the same thoughtful concern for detail that he found among those he was photographing. He understood the quality of silence in the vaulted architecture, in the swaying habits of the nuns, in their work, and, at his best, toned his lighting and movement to those elements.

Most of us adopt a certain reverence of perception to the religious sisters we encounter in life, and perhaps the mystique exists nowhere stronger than in Quebec where, at one time, almost every family sent one of its daughters into religious life.

Change in Quebec means that convents such as the home of the sisters of Saint-Famille will possibly disappear. This film helps us to understand the attraction and the reality of the choices *les servantes du bon dieu* have made.

Joan Irving

even more strikingly, the film itself reiterates Shilling's style through its similar use of color, texture, and faces. Vivid and colorful settings for his on-camera interviews often repeat the tones and hues just previously seen in a Shilling portrait. The words of the narration are as direct as the honest expressions captured in the painted portraits. As well, the film incorporates bold contrasts of texture and tone to highlight special moments.

As documented in this film, Shilling's life as an Indian artist has been one of continuing struggle, reaching its lowest point in 1975 when he faced death from heart disease at age 34. A series of self-portraits made over several years clearly reveals a young man struggling with inner and outer conflict. Facing death was a turning point for Shilling. The filmmakers, having shown us the vitality in his work and surroundings, at this point in the film include a sequence utterly drained of colour, a bleak wintry drive through barren landscape that works effectively as metaphor. Following successful heart surgery, Shilling's life and the screen itself become infused with a resurgence of color and activity. We see Shilling surrounded by family and friends, building a home, studio and art gallery on the Rama reserve. Final shots of the artist and his wife Millie with their first baby convey a wonderful feeling of harmony. Photographed inside the home they have built, this closing sequence of family portraits provides a simple and poignant finish to a film about cycles of life.

The Beauty of My People has won the awards for Best Direction and Best Scriptwriting in the American Indian Film Festival held in San Francisco, 1979. It is Alan Collins' directorial debut, though he is known for his editing expertise on such features as *The Brood*, *Love at First Sight*, *The Clown Murders*, *I Escaped from Devil's Island*, *Von Richthofen and Brown* and television work including *The Newcomers '1911'* (directed by Eric Till), *We've Come a Long Way Together* (Don Shebib), and *Backlot Canadiana* (Peter Rowe).

The experience of viewing *The Beauty of my People* is an inspiring one. Devoid of sentimentality and cliché, the film simply and powerfully shows us one man in the process of transcending limitations. In a remarkable way, *The Beauty of My People* urges each one of us to become who

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The Beauty of My People

d. Alan Collins, sc. Gary George, narr. Sherman Maness, ph. Dennis Miller, Robert New, ed. Alan Collins, sd. David Lee, Terry Cooke, m. Court Stone, p. Alan Collins, p.c. Nova Picture Productions (Toronto), col. 16mm, (year) 1978, running time 30 minutes, dist. National Film Board of Canada.

"I paint because there is no other way to express the beauty of my people," says Arthur Shilling, the Ojibway artist who is the subject of this award-winning documentary. Similarly, filmmaker Alan Collins expresses the powerful beauty of his subject by structuring the film along a narrative line of personal, human struggle, and by meticulously attending to stylistic elements that coincide with Shilling's own visual work. The result is a film that achieves harmonious unity with its subject.

As a painter, Arthur Shilling's work is characterized by a bold use of color and broad brush strokes which critic Peter White has called "reminiscent of Van Gogh." He is primarily a portrait

artist, using his relatives and friends on the Rama reserve as subjects. Collins' film shows us dozens of these portraits, along with the people and landscape which inspired them. But



Arthur Shilling, an Ojibway artist who faced death at 34 photo: Rudi Bies