

Jean and Serge Gagné's
La Couleur Encerclée

If one sees surrealism not only as a modern art form but also as a state of mind which seeks to overturn conventional structures, then surrealism has long been a tradition among the artists and writers of Quebec. It was only after the Second World War, however, that their continual denial of the established order crystallized in the form of the 1948 manifesto *Réfus Global* (total rejection). Initiated by the Quebec painter Paul-Émile Borduas, one of the first of Canada's abstract expressionists, the document called for a "new civilization... which refused to be founded exclusively on those tools of reason, logic and intention." Its emphasis lay in the realm of "magic and freedom."

Borduas was fired from his teaching job for his pains and became an exile from his homeland. But this challenge to Duplessis' repressive society became, by the '60s, a mythic event. Serge and Jean Gagné in *La Couleur encerclée* attempt to carry on this tradition.

The title of this film could be translated as the encircling of colour, if colour is seen as an expressive, emotive force being encircled, imprisoned or hemmed in by the forces of repression. The film, in essence, is a barrage of images (live and animated) and sounds with a repetitive theme and whose only coherence really comes from that repetition. The theme is an old one; the conflict between artistic, imaginative freedom and the restrictive forces of society.

Two main characters represent the forces of freedom (a painter), and oppression (a businessman who is involved in the art world as a publisher and art dealer). "The business of art is organized thieving," Van Gogh is quoted as saying, and throughout the film he is used as a symbol for the fate of the artist in a repressive society. Reproductions of his paintings constantly show up in *La Couleur*. Which seems odd enough for a film on contemporary painters, but what is stranger still is that these expressionist images are often metamorphosed into computer animated drawings.

Apparently the Gagné brothers are computer artists and their computer animated drawings are probably the most interesting parts of the film (although they go by too fast to hold our attention and are overwhelmed by the plurality of the live-action footage). It seems a strange idea to make a eulogy to Van Gogh, whose very brushstrokes emphasize the physical and emotional presence of the artist, with computer fabricated images, whose electronic origins confer on them a cold, mechanical aspect even when heated up by the use of bright, bold colours. The juxtaposition of these two artistic modes almost achieves the surreal effect (although unconsciously) that the rest of the film strives after so arduously.



• *La Couleur* – evoking great artists's work

There is no real plot, or, at best, only a tenuous one. The painter argues with the businessman about the fate of his artist son. A woman writer argues with her lover about having a child and tries to get her book, *Un Duo anormaliste*, published by the same businessman. Various people run around in front of the camera with painted faces. Two robots on a rooftop paint on a plastic canvas. Various voices on the soundtrack complain about the fate of the artist. Drawings of hell from a catechism book are changed through computer animation techniques. A young, nubile girl becomes a pupil of sorts, being ini-

tiated into the secrets of the creative process. And a man rolls around in horse shit and exclaims that "there where one smells shit one smells being" (*Là où ça sent la merde ça sent l'être*). At the end we keep seeing two white tombstones marked Vincent and Theo.

The film could be amusing if, like some of the '20s surrealist films, it gave us one visual gag after another, but its pretentiousness burdens it. Like Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or*, it would like to be a protest against the hypocrisy of a bourgeois society, but the most shocking image it has is that of a young girl rolling naked in bed with an older man.

Child pornography I can do without but, really, this just ends up looking silly. Buñuel created shocking images which stay in the mind long after the film has ended. These filmmakers can only invoke the ghosts of Van Gogh and Artaud but they cannot live up to them.

In some ways the film is reminiscent of Gilles Groulx's *Vingt-quatre heures ou plus*; especially in its use of a collage technique made up of *cinéma-vérité* sections, video inserts and the use of voice-over commentary. As in Groulx's film, *La Couleur* also invokes the *Réfus Global*. But it lacks its rigorous Marxist analysis of a wide spectrum of Quebec society and politics. By focusing only on the plight of the artist within that society, *La Couleur* turns the cry of anger into a whine of protest. Improvisation and spontaneity were the credo of abstract expressionist painters who, in Quebec, were called the *automatistes* because their painting method was related to that of automatic writing in surrealism. In *La Couleur encerclée*, it's not only the surrealist vignettes which recall that art movement but also the expressionist frenzy of quick-paced editing and hand-held camera movements.

In some ways the film, rather than being a work of fiction, as it is labeled in the advertisements, is more like a documentary or a docu-drama. It does offer its audience a fascinating glimpse of a certain side of Quebec culture, that of the French-speaking artistic milieu, but perhaps only of the older generation of long-haired '60s rebels. I could recognize a few; Vaillancourt leading an artists' protest, Le Bison Ravi (Patrick Straram) going on about poetry and art. The film certainly tries to be a document of its time and, like the *Refus Global*, it would like to strike a blow against what it sees as a repressive social order. Unfortunately the artists' anger is not very convincing because we do not get clear image of the society which oppresses them. There is the absurd businessman, but he's too much a figure of fun to seem very oppressive. There's the recurrent image of the concrete spans of an autoroute blocking out the sky, but they have a certain abstract beauty. Paradoxically it is the images fabricated by computer animation which are closer to the cold technological side of modern society which these artists seem to be rebelling against.

If the *Refus Global* was the first blow dealt for the Quiet Revolution then this film might be its death knell. Borduas not only wrote the *Réfus Global*, he also created great paintings which broke the established rules of seeing and created a new language of art. This film does neither. It is derivative and self-conscious where it should be original and freely expressive. The evocation of great artists' names and works does not guarantee a film of the same quality.

Mary-Alemany Galway •

LA COULEUR ENCERCLÉE d./sc. Jean Gagné, Serge Gagné d.o.p. Martin Leclerc sd. Marcel Fraser ed. Jean Dumieuz music André Duchesne l.p. Jacques Rainville, Frédérique Collin, Jean-Pierre Cartier. Produced by Les Productions Quatre Vins Neufs. Distributed by Les Films du Crépuscule. colour 16 mm running time 90 min.