



photo: Antoine Desjardis

IN FOCUS

by Louis Goyette

(Translated by Tom Waugh)

The death of Claude Jutra represents an immense loss for the Canadian film world. His name is associated first and foremost with **Mon Oncle Antoine** (1971), considered to this day as the best Canadian film ever. This film was also acclaimed by the international press, with prizes garnered abroad as well as in Canada. Jutra's renown was based primarily on films he shot in Quebec: **À Tout prendre** (1963), **Wow** (1969), **Kamouraska** (1973) and **La Dame en couleurs** (1985) are works that have earned a central place in the Canadian film repertory.

It is important, however, to remember that Jutra had a brief but important career in English Canada, and the principal goal of this article is to assess the filmmaker's English Canadian production. This part of the filmmaker's work has been unjustly overlooked by critics and I would like to restore it to its important place within Jutra's oeuvre. In particular, **Ada** and **Dreamspeaker** share wholly in Jutra's personal themes and deserve our attention all the more. They must certainly not be seen as minor works. At the same time, I would

Joseph Bottoms makes his contribution to Canadian content



like to reestablish Jutra's motives for moving to Toronto to work for the CBC.

After the release of **Wow** in 1969, Jutra shared his thoughts with a Quebec critic:

*"The simple fact of wanting to make films in Quebec is a political act. It's only here that I feel myself, I belong here and it's here that I can find my identity. I couldn't create elsewhere. And when we demand the right to make films here at home, we demand the control not only of our cinema, but also of our country."*¹

These comments might seem surprising considering that Jutra made several films outside of Quebec. All the same, we must remember the social and political context Quebec was plunged into during those years. Nationalist feelings were stronger than ever before in Quebec culture. Think of Charlebois's songs from that period or of the appearance of other deeply nationalist popular music. Jutra was himself also caught up in nationalist feelings and these comments are testimony to his intimate ties to Quebec.

In 1975, his film **Pour le meilleur et pour le pire** was released, an event from which Jutra probably never recovered. The reviews were very harsh, and to make matters worse, weak publicity managed to keep the film only three weeks in its first-run showplace. Devastated, Jutra changed his tone, telling *Le Jour*,

"If I always refused to do film abroad, it was not principles but a state of feel-

photo: Jack Rowland

Louis Goyette is an award-winning undergraduate student of film at Concordia University.



By Design



Ada



Dreamspeaker



ings that made me do so. Now, today, I'm heartbroken that I've spent two years of my life for a film that lasted three weeks at the *Parisien*, and that's that."²

A profound bitterness arises from these words. One thing was sure, gone were the days of making films only in Quebec on the pretext of being Québécois. Invited by Toronto, Jutra then decided to go and direct for the CBC (joining several other Québécois like Gilles Carle, Francis Mankiewicz, and André Théberge in the process).

The "For the Record" Series

On several occasions, Jutra declared that he "had to express himself in filmmaking whatever the cost," because it was like a drug, a veritable passion. Directing for the CBC gave him this chance to express himself. His acceptance of several projects in Toronto was due to the fact that nothing interesting was available in Quebec. In my interview with him on October 14, 1986, Jutra offered this clarification:

"Every Québécois filmmaker who spoke English and who was interested in working in English was welcome to participate in this project. I very often went from one side to the other, that is, carrying out projects at the same time in Quebec and elsewhere. I was doing the Montreal-Toronto shuttle. I took the train to go to Toronto but I would come back regularly to Montreal to work on other projects. People thought that I had been in exile in Toronto for years but that's false. In Toronto, everything went well. I really like working with the actors I had. As for the films, they were suggested by the CBC people. They came looking for me."³

The main goal of the *For the Record* series was to reflect Canada in an honest manner, its joys and its problems. In his article on the series,⁴ Marc Gervais details that all the films were structured around a rather modest budget. In terms of their narrative design, these films represent a kind of hybrid of fiction and the great Canadian documentary tradition. They explore and analyse different mechanisms of our society, and are praised by Gervais for their high degree of realism and credibility.

Jutra made two excellent films for this series, *Ada* and *Dreamspeaker*, produced in 1977 by Ralph Thomas. *Ada* is inspired by a short story of the same title published in Margaret Gibson's collection *The Butterfly Ward*.⁵ In directing *Ada*, Jutra collaborated closely with Gibson:

"As for *Ada*, they had me read the short story in question. After reading it, the first thing I did was meet Margaret Gibson. She was a very beautiful woman, of a truly bizarre beauty. She resembles all the characters in the film. She has surely lived what those characters have lived. I worked closely with Margaret. With her, I found myself in unbelievable situations..."⁶

Ada tells the story of the relations of a group of women living in a psychiatric hospital, relations that are sometimes very tender but often very tense. The theme of the film clearly relates to Jutra's personal experience, since he had studied medicine before becoming a filmmaker. *Ada*'s statement is coloured by a violence that the viewer may find hard

to take. This stand is justified by the filmmaker's own words:

"During the Duplessis period, I was finishing my last years of medicine. I was very interested in psychiatric problems. Working in these specialized hospitals,

I was familiar with the patients' miserable conditions and the injustice that could exist."⁷

The use of a certain kind of violence became a means of making these conditions and this injustice more convincing. In *Ada*, injustice centres on the lobotomy that the doctors had committed on the brain of *Ada*, one of the characters. But far from sensationalistic, this violence is motivated and part of the author's statement. *Ada* is primarily a film where the intimate relations among the characters are in the foreground. Jutra's approach was scrupulous:

"I believe that you can in fact make a

connection between my medical studies and this film. As for the failure of medicine, it's a hard problem to resolve. I used to believe in medicine. My father was a doctor, my grandfather was a dentist. I was obliged to believe in medicine. From my point of view, I didn't make this film as an accusation against doctors. That was already present in Margaret Gibson's story. All the same, the institution is an alienating place. I think that it would be ridiculous to make a film showing that people coming out of that hospital become 'normal' and happy again. That seems impossible to me."⁸

Ada offers to the spectator an impressive gallery of characters. Jutra always said that he was more interested by the psychology of women than of men. Gibson's story thus became a perfect vehicle for analysing, in depth, relations between women. The cast was made up almost exclusively of actresses from the theatre, including Anne Anglin and Janet Amos for the leads. For a long time, Jutra himself had studied and performed for the theatre. That explains the importance the filmmaker placed on the acting of his players:

"My relations with actors are always established directly, since the world of actors was also my world. When I direct, the performance of the actors is what's most important, it's a priority."⁹

It should be noted that during his stay in Toronto, Jutra participated in theatrical activities as well. In particular, he directed *Il Teatro del Pepperonni*, a *comedia dell'arte* praised by the critics for its originality. In addition, Jutra performed in several of his own films, including *À tout prendre*, *Mon Oncle Antoine*, and *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire*, not to mention films by other directors, like *Riel* and *Two Solitudes*.

The scenario for *Ada* remained very faithful to Gibson's story. The film's dialogue is, with some exception, an exact transcription from the original.

Dreamspeaker, also from the *For the Record* series, was shot on Vancouver Island. One more time, an institution of rehabilitation is presented as an alienating place. The film's plot goes like this: Peter, a young boy suffering from serious psychological problems, escapes from an institution and finds refuge with an old Indian living in a forest. In touch with nature, Peter gets back his equilibrium and his serenity. But the authorities recapture him and send him back to the institution. He can't tolerate this existence and commits suicide.

With *Dreamspeaker*, Claude Jutra renewed a theme that he had long given special emphasis: youth. On this subject, he explained in 1970:

"Youth. I am the prisoner of my youth. There's nothing I can do about it. I think I will be always talking about it in one way or another. The more I move ahead the more I regress. When I was 30, I made *A tout prendre* about myself at 27. With *Wow*, it's 18-year-olds. In *Mon Oncle Antoine*, they're 14."¹⁰

Strangely enough, this phenomenon

of regression with time Jutra refers to is verified all the more in his last films. **Dreamspeaker** features a young boy of 11, while **La Dame en couleurs** recounts the life in an orphanage for children between 8 and 15. **Dreamspeaker**, it should be mentioned, was named in 1977, the "best Canadian TV drama" by the Canadian Film Awards, an honour well deserved.

Jutra saw a major difference between a film shot for television and a theatrical film:

*"I'm much less interested in television than I am in film or in theatre...The thing about television is it is instant, it is ephemeral. You get quite a bit of feedback immediately after a programme. Instantaneous exposure. But, though it has a wide audience and reaches a great number of people on all levels of society, it is forgotten. The impact is as brief as it is intense."*¹¹

Having made this distinction, Jutra didn't conceive his work for television very differently from his usual work for the cinema. To say "a film made for TV" was in his opinion unjustified and ridiculous.

Surfacing and By Design

Surfacing and **By Design** are the two feature films that Jutra directed in English Canada, both produced by Beryl Fox. However, I don't believe we can consider **Surfacing** as a Jutra film in every respect. Based on Margaret Atwood's novel of the same title,¹² the plot is focused on Kate, a young liberated woman who decides to drop everything to look for her father who has disappeared. As the search advances through the northern woods, Kate's own interior search is revealed to the spectator through her tense and violent relations with her companions.

In fact, according to journalistic accounts of the film, Jutra was called in at the last minute to save the **Surfacing** shoot. Originally, Beryl Fox had hired an American scriptwriter, Bernard Gordon, to adapt the novel, as well as a cast of American actors, notably Kathleen Beller and Joseph and Timothy Bottoms, the latter dropping out before shooting began. The director was to be Eric Till who also withdrew just before the shoot. The film's financing thus seriously threatened, it would have had to be cancelled if Fox were not able to find another director. Called to the rescue, Jutra arrived too late to rewrite the script and had to begin shooting immediately, setting aside his usual custom of writing or at least collaborating on his own scripts.

On its release, **Surfacing** met with severe criticism and seriously damaged the reputations of both Fox and Jutra. **Surfacing**, it was said, "transformed Atwood's unfilmable quest allegory into a simpleminded feminist equivalent." I myself consider that **Surfacing** is not a significant Jutra work, showing none of his stylistic and thematic concerns. Perhaps the only common point between **Surfacing** and the other films is the nat-

ural location of the action, the privileged setting where the truth and the characters' emotional instincts and drives come to the surface and explode.

In agreeing to direct **Surfacing** however, Claude Jutra made an important bargain with the producer - Beryl Fox agreed, in return, to produce his next film, namely **By Design**.

By Design is a light comedy in which Jutra explores the theme of lesbianism. The highly original conception can be summarized thus: two women love each other and decide jointly to have a child. They embark on a real manhunt to accomplish their goal.

This time, even if Fox continued as producer, Jutra was completely in charge. Inspired by an original idea by Joe Wiesenfeld, Jutra co-wrote the script with Wiesenfeld and David Eames.

Unfortunately, Jutra and **By Design** scarcely had it easier this time round. One more time, Jutra ran into hostile critics, not to mention a full year's delay in the release date. Critics accused the film of superficiality and of ridiculing marginal characters, an exaggerated reaction in my opinion. Using a light comedy as a vehicle, Jutra treated a delicate subject with finesse, at the same time respecting the lifestyle of his two heroines. I myself would go along with Martin Knelman on this subject:

*"By Design has also been bad-mouthed by journalists and industry insiders who normally know better. Is it because they're still trying to punish Jutra and Fox for the dreariness of Surfacing? Is it because they're made uncomfortable by the whole notion of lesbianism as a subject for comedy?"*¹⁴

It is interesting to note that **By Design** eventually did better in New York than here, with even the Festival of Festivals rejecting it.

Conclusion

In spite of all the different problems he faced, Jutra summed up his English Canadian production in a very positive way, even if it was only to keep him working:

*"In Toronto, they offered me things when nothing was available here...I went to Toronto to avoid getting rusty. I don't care what I said in the past. One film every four or five years in Quebec is insufficient. And unsatisfying. I have to express myself in film whatever the cost. It's a drug, a passion."*¹⁵

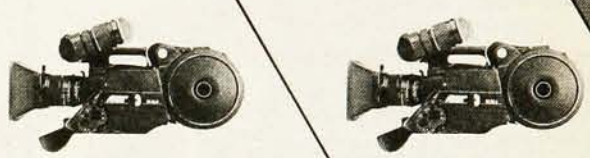
The death of an artist always involves the reconsideration of his/her work. In this article, I hope to have shed new light on certain films by Jutra that have been unfairly neglected by critics. In addition, as tribute is paid to Jutra more and more regularly in future retrospectives and repertory screenings, I hope I will have encouraged filmgoers to discover or rediscover a body of work tied together by Jutra's personal preoccupations. The filmmaker's English Canadian films and the various paths they reflect, taken by Jutra between 1976 and 1980, must be a part of this discovery.

Notes

1. Conseil Québécois pour la Diffusion du Cinéma. **Claude Jutra**, collection "Cinécastes du Québec", 1970.
2. **Le Jour**, Friday February 27, 1976.
3. Interview with Claude Jutra which took place Tuesday October 15, 1986.
4. Gervais, Marc, "Light years ahead", **Cinema Canada** 36, March 1977, pp. 34-36.
5. Gibson, Margaret, **The Butterfly Ward**, Ottawa, Oberon Press, 1976.
6. Interview with Claude Jutra which took place Tuesday October 15, 1986.
7. "Entretien avec Claude Jutra: ce sont les élans du cœur qui m'animent". **Ciné-Bulles**, February/March 1985, pp. 4-7.

8. Entrevue réalisée avec Claude Jutra le mardi 14 octobre 1986.
9. **Journal de Montréal**, November 26, 1977.
10. Conseil Québécois pour la Diffusion du Cinéma, **Claude Jutra**, Collection "Cinécastes du Québec", 1970.
11. Knelman, Paul, "Jutra on the Tube", **Cinema Canada** 53, March 1979, pp. 21-24.
12. Atwood, Margaret, **Surfacing**, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1972.
13. Knelman, Martin, "After we came in - Mum's the word", **Take Two: A Tribute to Film in Canada**, Edited by Seth Feldman, Irwin Publishing, 1982, pp. 21-23.
14. Ibid.
15. Petrowski Nathalie, "Le retour de l'exilé: entretien avec Claude Jutra", **Actualité** 5, January 1980.

Budget-Friendly Video Production

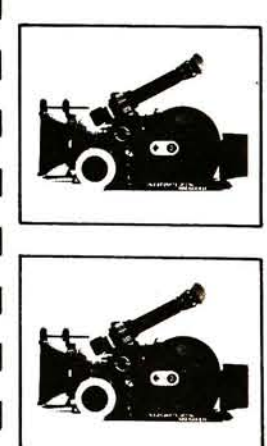


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CLAUDE JUTRA

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1987

• Jutra charts the distance travelled

JUTRA: a report

1972. I'm still trailling in the wake of "Mon oncle Antoine". Starting "Kamouraska". Not a frame is exposed and the film is already panned: "Shouldn't be done. Quebec can't afford it!" By now it has been sold in many countries and has made good money. Nobody noticed. Two dogged years to get "For better or for worse" off the ground. Released in one theatre still under construction. Many of my friends are still unaware it was ever made. After years of coaxing I yielded to Ralph Thomas's and John Hirsch's insistence that I make films in English for the CBC. Great guys these two. Happy work. Four films. Good films. Awards: "Ada", "Dreamspeaker". The problem with T.V. is not how films are looked at but how they're not looked at. They're not read. Then "Surfacing" I fear what I'm getting into. I should. The ground starts moving under my feet. I do not recognize the film I thought I made. I am ostracised for it. The CFDC has not invested in it, nor will it in the next one. Two dogged years to get "By design" off the ground. One year after the shoot, still not released. Did a lot of theatre work in Toronto and Montreal. Just directed a new play in Montreal. It's a hit. I enjoy my home on "Carri Saint Louis". I don't have a film project. I'm fine thank you. 1982

I meet Saul Rubinek and direct him in three films. Most important event.

Gouvernement du Québec
Ministère des Affaires culturelles
Cabinet de la Ministre

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LISE BACON ADDRESSING THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY: "THE PERSISTENCE AND TALENT OF CLAUDE JUTRA SHOULD ALSO SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN THE FUTURE OF TOP-QUALITY QUÉBEC CINEMA".

(Québec City, Wednesday, April 29, 1987) Lise Bacon, Vice-Premier and Minister of Cultural Affairs presented a motion to the National Assembly concerning the loss of film-maker Claude Jutra. Here are a few excerpts from the text of the motion passed today by the National Assembly:

"Since the recent loss of film-maker Claude Jutra, the Québec public, initially shattered by the news, has been able to appreciate the quality of several testimonies made by individuals who knew the life and work of

Some spoke of his talent, his professionalism, his love for Québec cinema. For others, Claude Jutra was one of the pioneers of top-quality Québec cinema. He was above all a human being subject to a wide array of emotions: from love to hate, satisfaction to revolt, having both a need for the established order and for total anarchy. The author of a wide array of first-rate works, Jutra had a very full career. Indeed, its sudden and tragic end took many by surprise. Claude Jutra was also a performer, playing several important roles in Québec films.

"Of all the testimonies made over the past few days, my attention was captured by the theme of freedom, so dear to Claude Jutra. It was this freedom, a freedom that we all possess but not always realizing to what extent, that characterized and determined the professional environment of Claude Jutra".

"We will not forget the talent of Claude Jutra and his attachment to this freedom which sometimes eludes us".

.../2

"I would like to say thank you to all of those people who helped and supported Claude Jutra during his lifetime. I would like to thank them for having helped us know a man of talent, a man blessed with an incredible sensitivity regarding the "human condition" and who has passed down important lessons that I am sure we will take full advantage of".

"The persistence and talent of Claude Jutra should also serve as an example to those who believe in the future of top-rate Québec cinema. But to attain such a level, we must be able to follow in Claude Jutra's footsteps and clearly define the problem issues that affect our society while continually bearing in mind the details that contribute to top-quality film production"

"Jutra did not disappoint his friends and associates, nor did he disappoint Quebecers as a whole who have been able to admire the fruit of his production on the screen. These works will continue to be ever-present and will remind us of his incredible sensitivity. We will always remember the special manner in which he expressed the contemporary problems that affect us.

- 30 -

Source: Antoine Godbout, Press Attaché
Office of the Vice-Premier and
Minister of Cultural Affairs
(418) 643-2110

FILMOGRAPHY

1947: *Le Dément du lac Jean jeune* (d. – with the collaboration of Michel Brault)

1948: *Abstraction* (d. – animated film)

1949: *Mouvement perpétuel* (d. – with the collaboration of Michel Brault)

1950: *L'École de la peur* (original idea, sc. – televised theatre for Radio-Canada)

1954/5: *Images en boîte* (writer and host – 13 shows for Radio-Canada)

1956: *Pierrot des bois* (d. sc. ed. and actor.)

1956: *Les Jeunes musicales* (d. and sc. for NFB)

1957: *Il était une chaise* (co-d. with Norman McLaren and actor)

1958: *Les Mains nettes* (d. – NFB)

1959: *Anna la bonne* (d. – produced by François Truffaut)

1959: *Fred Barry, comédien* (d./sc.) – episode of *Profils pour la télévision*, NFB

1959: *Félix Leclerc, troubadour* (d. – for *Profils pour la télévision*, NFB)

1961: *Le Niger – jeune république* (d. and ed.) NFB

1961: *Golden Gloves* (co-d.o.p. with Brault, d. by Gilles Groulx for the NFB)

1961: *La lutte* (co-d. with Michel Brault, Claude Fournier and Marcel Carrière, for the NFB)

1961: *Cinéma canadien* (writer and host – a series of 13 shows for Radio-Canada)

1962: *Québec – USA ou l'invasion pacifique* (d., d.o.p./ed., for the NFB)

1963: *Les Enfants du silence* (co-d. with Michel Brault for the NFB)

1963: *Petit discours de la méthode* (co-d. with Pierre Patry, ed. and narration, for the NFB)

1963: *À Tout prendre* (d./sc./ed. and actor)

1966: *Comment savoir* (d. for NFB)

1966: *Rouli-Roulant* (d./d.o.p./narration and ed., for NFB)

1968: *Le Viol d'une jeune fille douce* (d. by Gilles Carle – Jutra participated)

1969: *Wow* (d./sc. and ed., for NFB)

1969: *Au Coeur de la ville* (d. for OFQ)

1970: *The Act of the Heart* (actor) Film d. by Paul Almond

1970: *Marie-Christine* (d. for OFQ)

1971: *Mon oncle Antoine* (d./ed. and actor, for NFB)

1973: *Kamouraska* (d. and co-sc.)

1975: *La Fleur aux dents* (actor) d. by Thomas Vamos for NFB

1975: *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* (d. sc. and actor)

1976: *Québec fête* (co-d. with Jean-Claude Labreque)

1977: *Dreamspeaker* (d. – episode of *For the Record* for CBC)

1977: *ADA* (d. episode of *For the Record* for CBC)

1978: *Seer Was Here* (d. for CBC)

1979: *The Wordsmith* (d. for CBC)

1979: *Surfacing* (d.)

1980: *By design* (d.)

1984: *La dame en couleurs* (d.)

Photos from Morocco, taken in Rabot by Terence Macartney-Filgate

A sense of freedom: Michel Brault and Claude Jutra by the water in Morocco, 1960

