

visits to the canadian countryside

by Piers Handling

Three recent Canadian features – *Sunday in the Country*, *Sudden Fury* and *Recommendation for Mercy* – are all films which are set in the country and yet harbour great violence. Piers Handling examines their themes and their structure as well as the role of women as victims of this violence.

In a country such as Canada one would expect the natural environment to provide a key backdrop to the settings of many of our films. Traditionally nature has been the repository of values that are now outmoded, but nevertheless respected for their timelessness. As man begins to see himself as a victim of rapid industrial/urban progress, he has returned to nature in some attempt to redefine lost values that provide a more human base. The mythology that surrounds rural society is still pervasive – country communes are making a reappearance, natural foods are in vogue, and the environmental concerns of the sixties and seventies suggest a re-assessment of our abuse of wildlife and its natural habitat. I use this by way of an introduction to my reactions to three recent films which are set in the country – ***Sudden Fury*, *Recommendation For Mercy* and *Sunday In the Country***. Not that these films are unique. Important Quebec films of the last decade have commented on misconceptions associated with Quebec rural society. Gilles Carle in particular has worked within this thematic concern. ***Red*, *Les mâles*, *La vraie nature de Bernadette* and *La mort d'un bûcheron*** redefine any idealistic conceptions we may have of the countryside. Damude, Markowitz and Trent unconsciously have explored themes that bear an amazing resemblance to each other. Each sets his film within the Canadian countryside revealing anything but an idyllic pastoral paradise. Using this as a base, they then treat common themes which I shall attempt to trace.

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Violence in one form or another lies beneath the serene exterior of country life in all three films. When it erupts it is irrational, final and has many implications. In ***Recommendation For Mercy*** we are shown a small rural community which harbours adolescent sexual tensions that cannot be released. Fran and Nora talk excitedly, yet cautiously, about their virginity; Nora wrestles provocatively with John; John and Frank spy on a girl while she is skinny-dipping; and the fat, unattractive Bruce masturbates to expel desires that would otherwise remain unexpressed. This is coupled with a cruelty towards each other that provides a partial outlet for this tension. Frank forces his girl to kiss John in a movie, he also taunts and beats up Bruce who cannot fully participate in these sexual games. Above all Nora lies to the police, hurt by the fact that John preferred Fran to her, standing her up on the day that ends with Fran's murder. This in particular has terrible ramifications. And in the series of flashbacks that deal with Fran's death, this cruelty, born out of these tensions, is given its final expression. Markowitz establishes these relationships very concisely, and in some respects it is the most satisfying part of his film.

For Fred in ***Sudden Fury*** the country is the focus for his dream of building an outdoor resort. Humiliated by a series of failures that have marred his life, he sees this as an opportunity that cannot fail, and which will turn him into a 'somebody' while reasserting his masculinity. When this dream is shattered by his wife's refusal to lend him money for the project, he is slowly turned into a homicidal figure who will stop at nothing to kill her. This demon force eventually draws a series of innocent bystanders into his



Recommendation for Mercy

ravages. For Al, who stops at the scene of the car accident, the physical locale works against his attempts to help the injured wife. Conversely its isolation and remoteness works to Fred's advantage – he can roam at will.

Sunday In the Country opens with gentle scenes of country life on a farm – going to church, preparing the Sunday meal – but this calm is shattered by the gratuitous killings of two young people, who wave down a car to help them fix their flat tire. After these indiscriminate deaths, the violence escalates at an alarming rate. Adam (Ernest Borgnine) shoots one of the three killers without a question asked, and then begins his own brand of torture and punishment which ends with the other two dead. Again the isolation of the farmhouse works in his favour and is a great disadvantage to Lucy who tries to stop his brutality.

But beyond these violent eruptions and killings there are other matters at stake. The notion of justice is central to all three films. Although this is dealt with in different fashions similar conclusions are reached. Damude takes us through a situation in **Sudden Fury** where the innocent bystander who stops at the accident becomes more and more enmeshed in the plot. In his quest to kill Fred, who left his wife to die in a car

accident, he accidentally kills a farmer's wife (Hollis McLaren) in the heat of the moment. By the end of the film three deaths are being attributed to him, and there is the possibility that the real killer will get off scot-free. Through bizarre twists in fate Al is made to appear the psychotic killer, which not only offends our sense of what is right but also our conception of reality. The police are shown to be ineffective and confused, refusing to believe Al's story, although assuring him that if he is telling the truth he has nothing to fear. Perhaps.

The judicial process is central to **Recommendation For Mercy**. With the circumstantial evidence pointing towards him John is placed on trial. He is to be judged, not as a child, but as an adult, because of the heinous nature of the crime he is accused of – rape and murder. Unfairly placed in a man's world, John falls victim to a retributive system of justice that evidently needs to put the blame on someone. Markowitz points out that the real identity of the killer will remain unknown. The police are shown to be ineffective in assessing the evidence, and when they question Nora, are led along the wrong path, as she deceitfully covers up her part in the affair by telling them more or less what they want to hear. However the two cops are never ridiculed, and their confusion as they sit looking at the evidence on slides is bewilderingly human. Our feelings towards them are tinged with ambiguity as their initial questioning of John is harsh, angry and aggressive.

Markowitz also ties the system of law to Fran's parents. He owns the meat-packing factory where John's father works, and as John awkwardly puts it "they can afford the lawyers." Markowitz's attitude is expressed most succinctly in a scene where a little boy is called upon to testify, and when asked to be seated in the dock he is subsequently lost from view.

Sunday In the Country has a different perspective on justice. Confronted with the three killers, Adam decides to take matters into his own hands imposing a one-man law, where he is both judge and executioner. His torturing of the two remaining killers is shown to exist outside the normal processes of the law. It is also excessive and condemnable. In this way Adam descends into a type of madness, and becomes no better than the killers. Even the name Trent gives to this character is significant. The biblical associations suggest a garden of Eden that is about to be destroyed and we are shown a loss of innocence in more than one way.

In all three films we feel there has been a miscarriage of justice. **Sudden Fury** and **Recommendation For Mercy** show instances where the normal processes of society cannot deal successfully with the violence that has been released. This is also true of **Sunday In the Country** although some kind of primitive justice has been applied, no matter how misdirected. But as an audience we cannot condone Adam's actions. His law is a reign of terror that should not be allowed to exist. And even the police are incapable of dealing with the events that are precipitated, and are no match for the sadistic Leroy (Michael Pollard).

The triangle is basic to the structure of these films. Women act both as intermediaries, and more importantly as victims and objects. The other two sides of the triangle are viewed as opposing forces, the opposite ends of a moral spectrum. In simple terms it can be seen as a struggle of good against evil, or

innocence against outside forces that destroy it. The purest form of the triangle is shown in **Sudden Fury** where the wife Janet is obviously the victim. Al, the innocent bystander, and Fred, the husband, engage in a battle with each other that is a simple equation of good fighting evil. The film ends on this struggle between the two of them, as Janet dies about half way through the film. Her role is quite revealing. The film opens with her in bed with another man, and it is Fred's discovery that she has a lover that really causes the accident. Strictly speaking she is punished for her actions, while Fred is uninjured in the crash. Henceforth she is incapacitated and takes no active role in the film. She is no more than a catalyst for what ensues.

Fran in **Recommendation For Mercy** plays an equivalent role to Janet's. Early in that film we see her climbing into a car with a brash, abrasive soldier who is obviously older and more experienced than she – the type of person we don't really associate her with. The soldier is later closely linked with Fran's death. John tells the police that he saw a red car near the scene of the rape, and there is a distinct possibility that it belongs to the soldier. When the verdict is handed down, and John is pronounced guilty, Markowitz rather clumsily cuts to the soldier who lets out what appears to be a sigh of relief. Fran is a victim – regardless of who committed the crime – of some misdirected masculine sex drive. The tragedy of her death is related to the weight she carries in the film. Fran is a very special person in John's eyes, and it is through him that we see her as something different and precious. John is portrayed as innocent, misunderstood and a scapegoat for society. The entire second half of the film is viewed solely in terms of John's struggle with a system that only wants to crush him. This rural society is ridiculed by Markowitz through his characterization of the prosecuting lawyer, the judicial system, and the judge's harsh final words to the jury that are extreme in their vindictiveness. Alone and contrite by the film's end, John is a crushed figure and we can only sympathize with what has befallen him.

Sunday In the Country reveals a similar triangular structure. Lucy shares characteristics common to both Fran and Janet. As the only woman in the film she is victimized and mistreated by both her grandfather and the killers. She is an ineffective participant in the play that unravels before her eyes, and is benignly treated by Adam as a 'typical' woman who will have no share in any decisions. Her outrage is also our own. Caught between two forces that either cannot comprehend her (Adam), or who only wish to use her (the killers), she is consigned to play a minor role in the outcome of the story. But the moral force of the film lies with her; her sense of right and wrong is also our own. Significantly the importance of her role diminishes towards the end of the film, and she has left before the final scenes are played out. Her ultimate inability to affect the course of events is both enervating and disorienting. To some extent the ending of **Sunday** confuses me. The final showdown between Adam and Leroy seems to sidestep some of the issues raised by the film. Leroy is the most despicable of the bandits, and the one who most deserves the primitive justice that Adam is handing out. Is Trent condoning certain of Adam's actions, after forcing his audience to question him for the rest of the film? **Sunday** is different from the other two films in one important respect. The other two sides of the triangle are portrayed in a slightly different fashion. Trent sees them as facets

of evil fighting it out against each other. While Adam's intentions may be honourable, his judgement of what is right and wrong is revealed as self-centred and destructive. As a result Lucy is not only victim but also the residual force of good in the film.

There is a further point to make. In both **Sudden Fury** and **Recommendation For Mercy** the characters who hold the audience's sympathies – Al and John – become victims themselves. This parallels the narrative strategies of **Sunday In the Country**, and both of them become an equivalent to the part Lucy plays in that film. This points towards a complete moral confusion at the centre of these works. Moral actions and their ramifications are shown to lack clarity, and are deflected from their true intentions. One has only to think of the western as a touchstone of certain moral lessons, here there is no equivalent. Instead we are presented with confusion and defeat, where there are no winners, only losers. As well there is an almost complete lack of any normal, healthy heterosexual relationships at the forefront of these films. Janet and Fred's marriage is already on the rocks when **Sudden Fury** begins, and the couple who own the farmhouse that Fred stumbles across, are unable to deal with the violence that ensnares and destroys them. Adam and Lucy are separated by their differing conceptions of life and morality. Lucy has a boyfriend that she eventually runs off with, but their relationship is peripheral to the film. Furthermore both of them show an inability, and finally an unwillingness, to confront Adam in any forceful way. Their escape from the horror of Adam's actions can only be viewed as an abdication of their responsibilities. Fran and John appear to come the closest to a complete relationship in any of the films. However a cloud already hangs over them as Fran wants to go out with other boys, and of course the fate that befalls her ends the possibilities of any further development.

It would appear that Damude, Trent and Markowitz are addressing themselves to the same kinds of questions. Values and illusions we tend to associate with the countryside, and nature, are revealed as hollow, and indeed, unhealthy. Not only is rural society unable to deal with specific human emotions, but it engenders attitudes that create negative emotions once released. People and events turn in upon themselves to form twisted patterns. This withdrawal from normal social mores culminates in a distorted idea of what is right and wrong. Adam's conception of justice is perverted, and based on the old codes of the frontier. The judicial system in **Recommendation For Mercy** is misguided and cruel. In **Sudden Fury** the farming couple, especially the husband, has an outdated idea of morality that is ruthlessly exploited by Fred. It is as if their fault is their trustfulness. If this is indeed the case then traditional values of honesty and generosity are not enough anymore to deal with contemporary forces.

I have not spoken of these films as belonging to a genre but they can certainly be viewed this way. They share characteristics so similar as to warrant such a distinction. The word genre signifies certain conventions that are followed, based largely upon stock situations. The gropings, awkwardness and occasional lapses of these three films point more towards the establishment of a genre than a confident working within structures that the genre provides. It remains to be seen whether these thematic patterns will indeed develop into a Canadian genre, and if they do whether workable films will result. □

*For a review of **Sudden Fury**, see p. 48.*