

Yves Dion's

L'Homme renversé



• Yves Desgagnés and André Lacoste are sooo confused

L'homme renversé (Man Upside-down) is a feature-length film which deals with the 'new man', i.e., one confronted with a world where his male prerogatives are no longer taken for granted. How does this 'new man' react to the changed situation? Has he himself really changed?

My first thought on looking at this film was that a woman should never have been sent to review it. I felt like a voyeur looking through a peephole into the boys' locker room. Indeed there is something voyeuristic about a film that starts up as a documentary and ends up as a fiction. At least this was my first impression of the structure of the film. And I think that generally the first part does come across as a documentary.

We meet two actors and one actress who are taking part in a filmed workshop on the subject of sexuality. This part is done in a *cinéma-vérité* style and even includes interviews with the participants conducted by the director. Since the director is played by Yves Dion who is the director of the film we assume that this is 'reality'. But there are several filmic codes at play here and if we watch carefully, right from the start of the film, the 'reality' of the documentary footage is put into question.

The first shot of the film is of a tape-recorder and the sound man. This establishes the filmic apparatus, a device often used in *cinéma-vérité* to remind the audience that this is 'reality' and it includes the presence of the film crew. It is a shot which signals that we are in the documentary mode. The next few shots are of a man parking a car. In terms of cinematic codes they are much too structured (separate shots taken from different angles, car coming up to the camera and stopping) to belong to the *cinéma-vérité*, catching-life-on-the-move, mode. On the sound track we hear the voice of the driver. This is another *cinéma-vérité* impossibility since we are apparently listening to his thoughts. He's arriving at the studio where the workshops are to take place, and catching a glimpse of the other actor, he muses on how sure the other was of himself when they were young.

Inside the studio we see the two actors, who were apparently childhood friends, meet. They are Guy (the driver) and Daniel and are joined by Claudine. Guy is an actor in TV commercials, Daniel acts in experimental theatre and Claudine is there as a representative of the women's movement. In an interview, Yves Dion asks her for her reaction to being asked to take part in a workshop on the masculine condition. "Amused at first," she replies. Indeed her attitude throughout

the film remains semi-amused, semi-frustrated by these men who are trying to play the game of self-disclosure which was such a big part of the consciousness-raising groups in the women's movement.

But these three do not just sit around and talk. Being actors they try to use improvisation techniques in small skits which deal with masculine roles. However there are problems. Guy is the first one to show his reluctance. "Je veux pas apporter mes bibittes," he says. And Claudine replies, "That is the masculine condition." This, it seems to me, is the thesis of the film. For Yves Dion the masculine condition seems mostly to be an inability to communicate one's intimate problems. Perhaps, even an inability to acknowledge them. Even Daniel, who is the more extrovert of the two actors, says that his goal in life is to never have to talk again, to never be obliged to define himself. He points out that the male is always playing the role of the super-hero, like James Bond, equal to any situation.

The fact that we are never sure what is scripted and what is not becomes an excellent device to keep the audience questioning the truth of these statements. For myself, as a woman, the film was doubly mysterious since the condition was other than my own. I finally had to drag a male friend to see it with me and tell me if this was really the way it was. He thought that it was true that males seldom talk between themselves about intimate matters. Apparently it leaves one open to questions about one's virility.

At this point the film began to make more sense to me. In the workshops there are a couple of improvisations the actors undertake which seem significant. One is concerned with father figures, the other with sexual harassment. The father figures are just as unable to communicate as their sons, retrenched as they are in their authoritative masculine roles. With these models before them it is easy to see why the sons have problems. The improv on sexual harassment is even more interesting in that Guy is completely unable to deal with it or to go on acting in it. It is this scene which triggers the change from the documentary mode to the fiction mode.

We leave the workshop space and go out with Guy and Daniel on a ride to their old neighbourhood. The camera becomes an invisible witness, whose point-of-view is that of the narrator/director. Over dinner, Daniel tells Guy that, when they were young, he had witnessed Guy being sexually harassed in the corner grocery store. Why did he deny it? Guy

replies that he was already being taunted with the label of homosexual by the gang of boys to which they belonged and asks Daniel why he never defended him? Daniel answers that he couldn't do anything about it. This triggers Guy's anger at Daniel's superiority in any situation. The competitiveness which is perhaps at the core of every male relationship surfaces here, and is underscored in the film by a little vignette seen from Guy's point-of-view. Three teenagers come out of the alley next to the restaurant, two boys and a girl. They seem very chummy until the girl starts to playfully hit one of the boys. They run off together and end up making out while the other boy wistfully looks on.

The questions that come to mind are: is there such a lack in the documentary mode that the filmmaker has switched to fiction? Or, is the whole film a fiction from beginning to end? The questions have wide implications for documentary filmmaking in Canada at the moment and have much to do with the decline of *cinéma-vérité*. Documentary filmmakers in the past thought they could capture the truth of a situation by simply letting it happen in front of camera, or even by making it happen. Present-day documentary filmmakers seem to find it more honest to create fictions based on real-life situations. The basic conflict in the film, between the director and his actors, is thus symptomatic not only of the male condition but also of the failings of *cinéma-vérité*. A situation is set-up by the filmmaker where his actors are supposed to reveal their inner lives but find themselves unable to do so. I have always wondered how much of the truth about themselves people really told in interviews. Who wants to disclose their private selves in front of a camera, anyway? Perhaps only a very exhibitionist personality like Shirley Clarke's Jason. Documentary filmmakers seem to have realized these limits and thus the birth of the docudrama.

But is this such a new form? It seems to me very close to Italian neo-realism in concept if not in execution. Perhaps this is because the docudramas are mostly based on the emotional experiences of the characters and unlike neo-realism do not tie up these experiences in any direct way to the physical, social and political environments in which they are lived. This, in my opinion, gives a closed, studio feel to the docu-dramas which is claustrophobic and limiting. For instance, Guy and Daniel seem to be typical Québécois (to the point of being stereotypical) and yet, though they discuss their youth and take a walk through their old neighbour-

hood, we never really see the forces that have shaped them. The role of the Catholic Church in Québécois society, for instance, is never mentioned. I suppose that the director is trying to address a universal 'masculine condition' but it seems to me that the particular can make the general more interesting.

Perhaps this lack is also felt by the filmmaker for he makes a further jump from the fictional to the symbolic mode. Without any preparation, he cuts to a scene which seems to have no relation to the rest of the film, since none of the characters we've previously encountered appear in it. It is a rather strange scene. The camera is focused on the back of a truck which moves through a small town or a suburban setting. On the truck sits a man, naked except for a loincloth, facing the camera, with his hands chained to the side of the truck. He is covered in white flour. Several other men, who are also on the truck, keep putting raw eggs and other noxious substances on his body. He makes no protest. As the truck drives along we see reaction shots of people watching from the side of the road. This is quite a long scene but there is never any explanation given for it. It seems to be a ceremony which is sometimes still seen in Quebec, a rite of passage for the about-to-be-married male. I presume it is meant as some sort of symbol for the masculine condition. The man certainly seems to be trying to prove that he can take it like a 'man'.

The last scene of the film also seems to have some sort of symbolic import. Guy is left alone in the studio, rejected by his woman, tortured by his insecurities and, in a very theatrical scene, he ends up huddled on the floor in front of a curtain which covers one of the walls. Guiltily, Daniel, who had abandoned him, comes back only to be punched out as Guy lashes out in his pain. Finally they both end up sitting on the floor, side by side, huddled and miserable, in front of the curtain; freeze framed-end of film. The film closes with this apparent dead-end, symbolic perhaps of the two characters' pain and frustration at not being able to transcend their condition.

Mary Alemany-Galway •

L'HOMME RENVERSÉ d. Yves Dion sc. Yves Dion, René Gingras d.o.p. Pierre Letarte add. cam./key grip Kevin O'Connell sd. Alain Corneau, Richard Besse asst. cam. Séraphin Bouchard, Michèle Paulin a.d. Pierre Houle loc. man. Norbert Dufour mach./elec. Marc Paulin loc. res. Michel Dandavino ed. Yves Dion asst. ed. Monique Gervais grip m. Fernand Bernard m. mix Louis Hone sd. ed. Marie-Claude Gagné asst. sd. ed. Lynda Peers sdx Vital Millette mix Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian F. Croll titles concept Elizabeth Melançon titles Louise Overy admin Monique Létourneau, Nicole Charlebois prod sec. Louise Sutton, Joanne Pelletier p. Suzanne Dussault, Roger Frappier, Michel Gauthier thanks to Jean Dansereau, Reynald Robinson, Jacques Girard, Michel Brais, Guillermo de Andrea, Marc Chabot, Hélène Doyle, Gaetan Martel and special thanks to Michel Gauthier l.p. André Lacoste, Yves Desgagnés, Johanne Seymour, Yves Dion, Guillaume Bourque, Geoffroy St-Hilaire, Brigitte Singher, Paul Haddad, Colin O'Meara, Sylvie Drapeau, François Cormier, Christine Séguin, Maximilien Melançon, Dion (Maximilian), Isabelle Vincent, Anne-Marie Desbiens, Ginette Chevalier. A National Film Board of production coul. 35mm running time 97 min.