

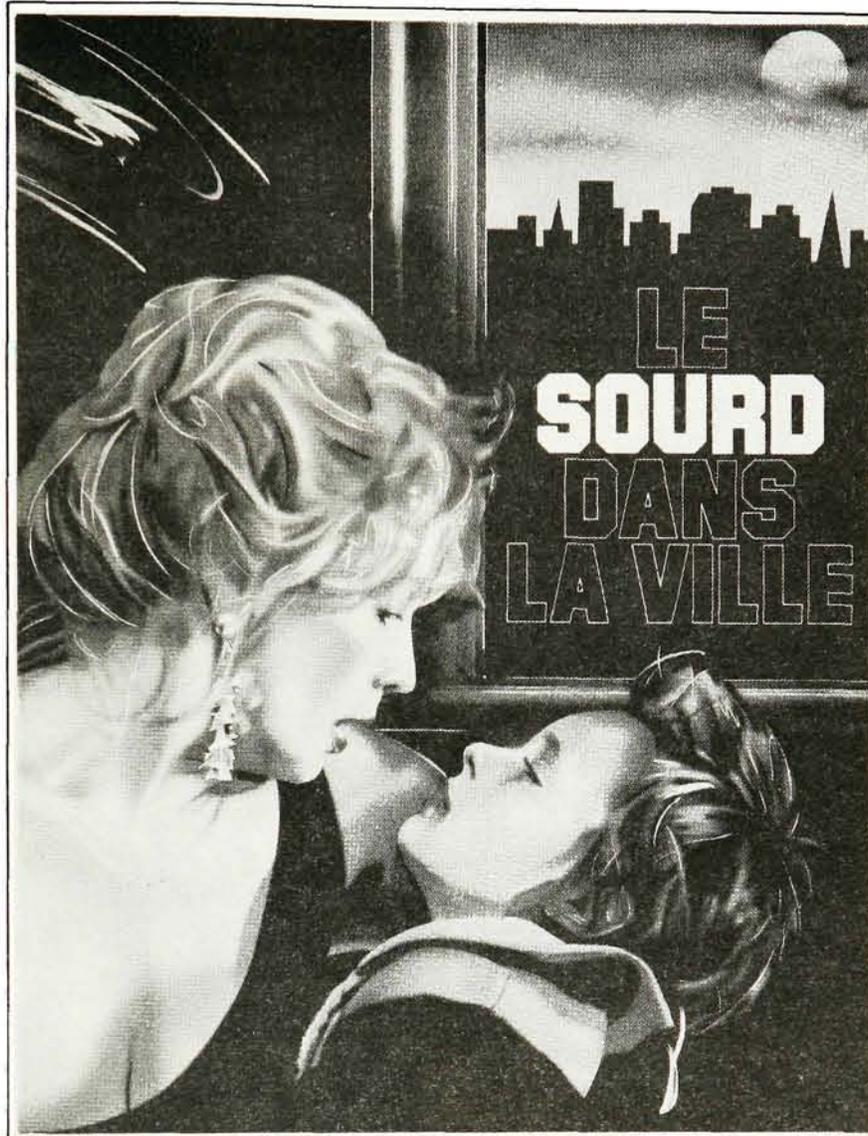
Mireille Dansereau's
**Le Sourd
dans la ville**

Mireille Dansereau's new movie, *Le Sourd dans la ville* (*Deaf to the City*), is a film that has both substance and style. It is tough, it is uncompromisingly serious, and Dansereau's meticulously constructed images, her resonant moods, her sometimes hypnotic rhythms, draw you in and stay with you. *Le Sourd*, although easy for some critics to brush off as too slow, too 'European' is the kind of movie that goes on living in your memory.

Based on a 1979 novel by Marie-Claire Blais, the film's narrative line is minimal. An ambiguous sound, a color, or the movement of feathery shadows on a child's face are more important than a twist in the plot. There are no big actions or big dramatic confrontations, but when the film is working at its best, there is a strong sense of being in the minds of the principal characters, and under their skin. Emotions, perceptions, physical sensations, dreams, and memories fuse in tightly and elliptically in edited sequences that portray human consciousness, connections, and destiny as mysterious and contradictory – beyond the grasp of theories or ideologies.

Florence (Beatrice Picard), is a woman in her '50s, whose husband has abandoned her. Right from the beginning of *Le Sourd dans la Ville*, she is frozen, disembodied, robotic. A stiff figure in a tailored grey suit, she stands at a big picture window, watching heavy white clouds moving silently across a deep blue sky. In a kind of trance, Florence picks up a suitcase and leaves her coldly luxurious apartment. Then, as she is about to get into her luxury sedan, her car keys drop out of her hand, and in an intercut, fall to the street in slow motion. Florence has disconnected. She walks away slowly and expressionlessly, wanders through Montreal streets that have an eerie calm.

It was daring for Dansereau to begin the film this way. Florence is not a character you can empathize with easily, and you've seen terminally alienated creatures like her before – in Antonioni's films and elsewhere. Dansereau increases the risks by joining the early images of Florence to spatially unrelated, and unexplained, shots of a spider creeping in the strands of its web, a small boy having a nightmare, a cactus plant, a poster of the California desert. It isn't until later in the film that the threads between these images tighten, and we perceive a bond between the boy, Mike (Guillaume Lemay-Thivierge), and Florence. Mike is sick, suffering, terrified of death. Behind her glacial mask,



Florence is also suffering, and she too has death on her mind.

Florence and Mike meet in the cheap hotel run by his mother Gloria (Angèle Coutu). One of the most startling scenes in *Le Sourd*, coming just after Florence has moved into a drab room at the hotel, shifts away from everything in the film up to that point. We see Gloria through an open doorway, fucking. Gloria is blonde, naked, full of energy – in one instant humping away with her thighs raised high, in another, chastising her boyfriend Charlie, (Claude Renart), because he's a lousy lay.

Gloria, as played by Angèle Coutu, is a voluptuous, wholehearted woman with a fleshy, imperfect, but beautiful body. She is the opposite of Florence, and at the heart of everything warm, sensual and seductive in Mireille Dansereau's film. The picture's carefully framed and lit shots induce us to look at the warm textures of skin, at veins threading just below its surface, at deeply saturated colors, at the repeated image of Gloria cradling her haunted little boy.

In *Le Sourd*, there is a tension between beauty and pain, as there is in the paintings (by Munch, Klimt, Modigliani, and others) that appear among the images in Florence's memories. Even the most painful of these memories has a

sensuality and delicacy of gesture. In a recurring flashback, the camera dollies toward Florence and her husband, lying back on deck chairs in the splash of colors of a sunny resort, as the husband absentmindedly strokes Florence's leg with his foot. Her face smiling, but silently pained, her body rigid, she impassively accepts this shadow of a caress. *Le Sourd's* images move in spirals that echo each other. In the shabby room she rents in Gloria's hotel, Florence lies rigidly on her bed, dressed in the prim grey suit, as Charlie, high on coke, pulls up her skirt and screws her.

Florence is disembodied; Gloria is full-bodied. Florence has visions of snowy mountain peaks under a cold blue sky; Gloria dreams about the golden California desert. When Mike is racked by the seizures that almost knock the life out of him, she holds him in her arms and promises him that they will escape to "San Francisco," the magic words that ward off death.

Gloria nourishes all the people who live in her hotel and the ones who hang around it. She serves them whiskey or spaghetti; she consoles them with the touch of her hand and with her body. But she is not a bland idealization – the goldenhearted Mother/Whore – nor is she a feminist role model. Dansereau makes sure that we see Gloria's narcissism, her restlessness, and

her selfishness. She delights in dancing topless; she collects porno magazines; she expects Mike to cook the spaghetti she feeds everybody; and she allows her daughter, Lucia, to sell herself. Gloria is part of the mean, tough world she inhabits. The tension between the contradictory aspects of her nature, like the movie's tension between beauty and pain, gives *Le Sourd dans la Ville* much of its power.

Near the end of the film, Florence sits on the staircase that leads to the hotel bar, watching the people in it like a child observing and learning about adults. Mike coaxes her into eating a plate of Gloria's spaghetti. She is moved by his tenderness, and by his premature knowledge of suffering. The ice cracks; emotions begin to quiver on Florence's face.

But when Mike and Florence's fingers reach out and touch, the little boy, tormented by nightmares of death, is touching death's hand in the flesh. He can't save Florence from her fate. She has come to Gloria's "Hotel des Voyageurs" to rediscover life in the moments before she leaves it. Florence turns away from the overheated bar and walks back up the staircase. The shots of the pure, white-capped peaks and the clear blue sky reappear. We hear a gunshot, and Mike screams soundlessly. Florence's heavenly mountains are his hell.

Mireille Dansereau's *Le Sourd dans la Ville* has its flaws. For example, Ginette Bellavance's minimalist music tends toward your classic heavy art-film score, and some of Dansereau's images and symbols recur too often, too insistently. However, none of this can explain why the picture hasn't received, in this country, the attention it deserves. *Le Sourd* did not get a single Genie nomination, while at the Venice Film Festival, it shared an award with Louis Malle's *Au Revoir les enfants*. Maybe the members of the Academy would have been more sympathetic if Florence had shot an elephant.

Maurice Alioff •

LE SOURD DANS LA VILLE exec. p. Louise Carré line p. Claire Stevens, Suzanne Laverdière assoc. p. Danielle Charlebois production man. Muriel Lize prod. acc. Hélène Aubin prod. co-ord. Suzanne Comtois loc. man. Mario Nadeau prod. assts Sylvain Arseneault, Bernard Rodrigue d. Mireille Dansereau 1st a. d. René Pothier 2nd a. d. Catherine Didelot cont. Thérèse Bérubé d. o. p. Michel Caron 1st asst. cam. Christiane Guernon 2nd asst. cam. Martin Dubois art d. Gaudeline Sauriol asst. art d. Pierre Gélinas props Charles Bernier gaffer Brian Baker asst. elec. Denis Ménard key grip Robert Lapierre grip Jean-Marc Lapointe asst. gaffer/grip Raynald Lavoie cost. des. Denis Sperdouklis ward Nicole Pelletier make-up Pierre Saindon hair Réjean Forget stills Attila Dory l. p. Béatrice Picard, Guillaume Lemay-Thivierge, Angèle Coutu, Pierre Thériault, Han Masson, Claude Renart, Sophie Léger. A Maison des Quatre Inc. Production produced with the participation of Telefilm Canada and Société générale du cinéma du Québec and the collaboration of Société de Radio-Télévision du Québec. Distributed in Canada by J. A. Lapointe Films Inc. (514) 522-7694. Foreign Sales Films Transit, (514) 844-3358. colour 35mm running time 97 min. 12 secs.