

By Gerald Peary

# An Irreverent Peek at Women in Canadian Cinema

# Babe Boy

**F**ilm theory, deconstruction, feminism, the women's movement, and sympathetic readings of John Berger and Laura Mulvey haven't punctured the thrill. Nor has writing pensive articles about women filmmakers, coediting a consciousness-raising book of essays (*Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*), and, currently, teaching a serious-minded university course on Women Directors.

I like watching attractive girls on the screen. Correction: attractive women. Correction: "babes." Females with smarts and spirit and class who, before the camera, exude an enviable, fabulously appealing comfort with their sexuality. In mid-1990s Canada, I mean wild-spirited Arsinée Khanjian in *Calendar*, skinny-dipping Cyndy Preston in *Whale Music*, table-dancing Mia Kirshner in *Exotica*, lusty-for-love Pascale Bussièrès in *When Night is Falling*, horny secretary Tracy Wright in *Blue*.

It's not just me. I think there are lots of us heteros at the movies: friends-of-feminism who are politically progressive and passionately committed to women's rights, respectful of our "significant others," who support affirmative action and abortion-on-demand, and women's shelters, and yet...and yet...my way of seeing? "No movie with a babe in a mini-

skirt can be all bad," I have been known to mumble.

There it is. I'm a schizoid "scopophile." The mind-loin split? Sorry, but I can't feel guilty because a screen image of a sexy babe is a turn-on. I *know* it's only an image. A fantasy. Gays and lesbians have pointed the way, celebrating desire, and it's time for heterosexual males to say – as we support women's rights in our real lives – that "We won't take it anymore," being condemned for drooling over babes on the screen.

And babes in Canadian movies? These days, huzzah, there's body heat in the Great White North. A long time coming.

As an American growing up with Hollywood movies in the late 1950s, I had a delicious array of female fantasy figures to choose from. Obviously Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, but also, for me, Virginia Mayo, Debra Padget, Terry Moore, and best of all, tight-skirted Natalie Wood sitting on the car hood in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

**As an American growing up with Hollywood movies in the late 1950s, I had tight-skirted Natalie Wood sitting on the car hood in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Canadians got McLaren animations and Grierson documentaries**

Meanwhile, Canadians got McLaren animations and Grierson documentaries. And censorship. Where were the babes?

Luckily, the libidinous French New Wave affected Quebec, and sexuality disembarked in French-Canadian cinema in the early 1960s. A bi-racial couple naked in bed in Claude Jutra's *À tout prendre* opened the gate. In that great year, 1968, Quebec's first big-time babe, Geneviève Bujold, arrived on the screen in both Paul Almond's *Isabel* and Michel Brault's *Entre la mer et l'eau douce*. And Quebec discovered sexploitation with *Valérie*, starring the now-forgotten Danielle Ouimet. Critic Gerald Pratley described *Valérie*'s plot: "a simple, physi-

# es in land

**Brian D. Johnson, Film Critic, *Maclean's***

Carole Laure has probably contributed more to babedom than anyone in Canadian cinema. What was different about her? She was gorgeous and had her clothes off a lot of the time. That was different. I've always had a huge crush on Geneviève Bujold, and I'm sort of glad she decided not to do *Star Trek*. She's a babe with incredible longevity, from her gamine days in Quebec films right up to *Dead Ringers* where she remains a very sexy screen presence, with an air of mystery about her that the camera adores. If Quebec movies are about sexual expression, English-Canadian films are about sexual repression. We have anti-babes, such as Cyndy Preston in *Whale Music* and Deborah Duchene in *Perfectly Normal*, both quite great, sexy and babacious but who are there as angelic, muse-like objects of desire for introverted, screwed-up, somewhat depressed English-Canadian men. Atom Egoyan films are explicitly sexually repressed, about concealing and revealing, about characters with secrets. So Arsinée Khanjian, who is very beautiful and exotic, becomes the ultimate anti-babe in that she's not allowed to be a babe for one second in *Family Viewing* or *Exotica*. Only in *Calendar* can she flower a bit, as an antidote to her tightly contained performances. Do you know something? Megan Follows in *Anne of Green Gables* just might be the ultimate English-Canadian babe ●

**JENNIFER DALE** in *Suzanne*



**Paul Donovan, Director, *Paint Cans*** Non-sexuality is a national trait. There's no proof sex existed in English Canada prior to 1967. The puritanism comes from our Scottish Presbyterian cultural foundation, 40,000 loyalists arriving here who didn't want to change anything. (Among Catholics in Quebec, there were clearly signs of sexuality.) English Canadians now have sex, but it's really uncomfortable and antiseptic.

In *Paint Cans*, we cast a babe in a little role who is beyond belief, Neve Camp-



cally well-endowed T-shirt type flees a convent, becomes a topless dancer, takes to the money-making world of high-class call girls."

Was there money to be made in Quebec with low-class sex farces? *Absolument*. In 1970, Claude Fournier directed Quebec's biggest financial success to that date, the Monique Mercure-starring *Deux femmes en or*, which concerned (Pratley again): "wives who pay the tradesmen in favours instead of money." The title says all of Denis Héroux's 1971 randy comedy – *7 fois... (par jour)*.

That was erotically sophisticated Quebec, a step away from hot-and-heavy Paris. The 1970s brought forth two more immortal québécoise babes: Céline Lomez, the striptease girl in Denys Arcand's 1975 *Gina*, and, let's give her credit, the babe-of-babes, the wet dream queen, frisky, dark-eyed, luscious-lipped Carole Laure. From *La mort d'un bûcheron* (1973) through *L'ange et la femme* (1977), she and her talented director, Gilles Carle, were the soft-X Dietrich-Sternberg of French-speaking Canada. To this day, nobody in a Canadian film has thrown off her clothes with the abandon of the beautiful Ms. Laure.

Poor, poor, polite, politically correct English Canada, sitting out the sexually liberated 1960s on screen, e.g. the young girl got pregnant in Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Good-bye* (1964) without a love-making scene. Only Larry Kent out in Vancouver made sure to insert

raunchy sex, and lots of it, into his little-seen movies, *The Bitter Ash* (1963), *Sweet Substitute* (1964), and *High* (1968).

So, the first real babe in an English-Canadian film? I don't know the actress's name, but she's the pretty, prep-py Torontonian who listens to Erik Satie in a Yonge Street record store in Donald Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970). She's a genuine object of desire, though frankly, on the ethereal edge of babe-dom. It was still three years down the highway until overtly sexual babes decorated an English-Canadian movie. I'm talking of the three straight-haired, mini-skirted carnivores – Randall Carpenter, Bonnie Nelson, Mira Pawluk – who (a) fornicate with, then (b) eat their men alive in Ivan Reitman's *Cannibal Girls* (1973). Another four years and American porno star Marilyn Chambers, blonde and bare-bosomed, infects Canada with a wild and bloody (American?) sexual disease in David Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1977).

Meanwhile, bashful English Canadian filmmakers stayed clear of sexually open Quebec actresses. Finally, Céline Lomez accomplished a fiery, successful crossover to English Canada as the sultry, seductive, oft-naked moll in Darryl Duke's Toronto-set *The Silent Partner* (1978). It took another two years, however, for the screen appearance of another sexy English-Canadian babe, though nobody remembers her but me: Kristine De Bell (where are you today?), a long-limbed, cute-in-blue jean shorts, camper

bell, who has lips to die for. Now she's doing a lead in an American film opposite Jeff Bridges. She wasn't given parts in Canadian films because she exudes fantasy-land sexuality.

Can you imagine government money for a movie about a bunch of babes in a hot tub? That would be heretical for funding; back to Presbyterianism. The right and left in Canada are exactly the same: no babes on screen, which goes against human nature! Most heterosexual males are attracted to women in their prime reproductive period: "babes." The average guy would rather be stuck on a desert island with a 16-year-old than Glenn Close ●

**John Harkness, Film Critic, *Now*** The first babe I noticed was Carole Laure, but followed quickly by Céline Lomez. She was the bad girl in *The Silent Partner*, though her great role was as the stripper in a small town in Denys Arcand's *Gina*. She's Mediterranean-looking, drop-dead gorgeous, and, I believe the phrase is, "built like a brick shit-house." I like Lenore Zann, who played Marilyn Monroe on stage and a stripper, memorably in *American Nightmare*, a pre-direct-to-video film. And there's Isabelle Mejias, a French-Spanish type who showed major star quality in *Unfinished Business* and *The Bay Boy*, in which she blew Kiefer Sutherland off the screen. After that, we have a profound babe shortage in Canadian film. A lot of filmmakers use their girlfriends as leads, which is politically correct. Unfortunately, no serious Canadian would use Shannon Tweed. She's too beautiful. It's reverse "lookism," privileging ordinariness over beauty. Or maybe, I don't know, all the great Canadian babes moved to California ●

**Ron Mann, Director, *Comic Book Confidential*** As a kid, I remember the shower scene in *The Mask*, Canada's first 3-D movie, which gave me a hard-on. Very voyeuristic. Then there was the hostess of *Reach For the Top*, a teen quiz show. I got off when she hit that buzzer. In the movies, Ivan Reitman was first with *Foxy Lady* and *Cannibal Girls*, which had babes with fangs. I remember the poster for *Foxy Lady* in 1971, at the same time as *I Am Curious Yellow*. It melted the frozen north. But what was really exotic were québécois films. Anything French was sexy. Carole Laure! Nowadays, I think Rebecca Jenkins is a quintessential babe, her face sandblasted by Alberta winds, her beautiful, songbird voice in *Bye Bye Blues*. But the ultimate babe is Mary Pickford. Oh, those closeups! You can see the landscapes of Canada through the eyes of Mary Pickford ●





from left, opposite page, the Quebec trinity: GENEVIÈVE BUJOLD in *Entre la mer et l'eau douce*; CÉLINE LOMEZ in *The Silent Partner*, CAROLE LAURE in *L'ange et la femme*; MEGAN FOLLOWS in *Anne of Green Gables*: just might be the ultimate English-Canadian babe

in Ivan Reitman's *Meatballs* (1979). Everyone recalls Jennifer Dale in Robin Fry's *Suzanne* (1980). This campy melodrama has nothing to offer but nubile Dale in sundry states of semi-dress, but that was enough; the 1980s opened proudly with, at least, a bonafide English-Canadian pin-up. At the time, I interviewed the sensuous Ms. Dale about *Suzanne* and, afterward, slipped a photo under her door of Jennifer Jones in *A Duel in the Sun*. The resemblance was uncanny: a classic Hollywood babe, c. 1946, was replicated, sublimely, in English Canada.

Well, that's my Canadian babe hall of fame. At the 1994 Toronto film festival, I asked some of the gathered male filmmakers, critics, festivals curators to come up with their own informal, hush-hush lists. Finally – to cover my tracks? – I checked in with one real-life beautiful-

brilliant babe actress, Torontonian Hadley Obodiac, who appears in *Highway 61* and the forthcoming *Gun Control*, and who, as a filmmaking student at Cornell University, studied feminist and cultural theory. "Assuming the terminology is tongue-in-cheek, and if guys can be babes too, I'm really happy there's a babe list," said the astute Ms. Hadley. "Terms like 'babes' and 'stars' are missing from the viewer's vocabulary in Canada. There are Canadians who have made 65 films and still aren't perceived as 'stars.' So we need to start using such alluring terms as 'stars' and 'babes'" ●

*Gerald Peary teaches and writes about Canadian film in Boston.*

