

Montreal

MAIN

UNCERTAIN IDENTITIES

BY Peter Harcourt



“Chaque homme doit inventer son chemin,”

Jean-Paul Sartre

In the 1960s, during the incipient years of classic Canadian cinema, filmmaking was a cottage industry. Even at the NFB, the nation's only source of continuous production throughout the 1950s, filmmakers worked at the level of craft. Although series such as *Faces of Canada* (1952–4) and *Candid Eye* (1958–61) were designed specifically for television, many films were made in more speculative ways. *Corral* (1954), *City of Gold* (1957) and *Lonely Boy* (1962) all sprang from the passions of individual filmmakers, creating a reflective documentary that is virtually without equal anywhere in the world.

In the early 1960s, films grew out of personal enthusiasms. Canadians wanted to make movies about their own lives and they wanted to make feature films. At the Film Board, both *Le Chat dans le sac* (1964) and *Nobody Waved Good-Bye* (1964) emerged from intended shorts; while outside the NFB, films such as *Seul ou avec d'autres* (1962), *The Bitter Ash* (1963), *À tout prendre* (1964) and *Winter Kept Us Warm* (1965) were stitched together from whatever scraps of financing the filmmakers could assemble. The establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corp. (CFDC) in 1968 raised the production of films to a more professional level: filmmakers could now be paid! But since the CFDC had no mandate for distribution or exhibition, the films were rarely shown. This situation led to what I have called our “invisible Cinema”—films that existed but were seldom seen. Nevertheless, films such as *Il ne faut pas mourir pour ça* (1968), *Valérie* (1969), *A Married Couple* (1969), *Go in' down the Road* (1970), *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971), *The Only Thing You Know* (1972), *The Rowdyman* (1972) and *Paperback Hero* (1973) began to define a classic Canadian cinema.

These were the days of cultural idealism. With little reflection concerning race or gender bias, this concern with what kind of film would be truly Canadian inflected the cultural attitudes of the time. Indeed, the nationalist enthusiasms of the 1960s even led me to describe *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), somewhat mischievously, as the best American film made in Canada that year! However, the film did provide a template for later films to come. Nowadays, many American films are made in Canada and an even greater number of Americanized television programs. In 1984, when the CFDC morphed into Telefilm Canada, film production became not only more professional but also more industrial. Careers were now possible within film, not just avocations. From this industry, substantial figures emerged—David Cronenberg, Denys Arcand, Léa Pool, Atom Egoyan, Jean-Claude Lauzon, William D. MacGillivray, Patricia Rozema and many others. And yet, in spite of inflationary funding policies, there is still an underground Canadian cinema—little films made on small budgets out of individual passions—often made outside the major production centres. For exam-



ple, in 2000, *Red Deer* appeared from the Prairies, *Parsley Days* from the Maritimes and *La Moitié gauche du frigo* from Quebec. These films have received limited exposure, carrying on the tradition of a distinguished but invisible cinema—an artisan cinema always searching for self-definition.

I offer this synoptic preface because in 1974 *Montreal Main* grew out of this cottage-industry tradition. With a grant of \$17,000 from the CFDC at a time when Canadian features were costing about \$250,000, *Montreal Main* was shot on 16 mm for a budget of \$20,000. Conceived by Frank Vitale but collectively directed, scripted and enacted, the film takes us into areas where we had never been before and where, to this day, some of us may not wish to go. Furthermore, as in the foundation films of the 1960—as if to valorize their true-to-life dimension—the names of the characters retain the names of the actors.

Montreal Main explores the growing friendship between Frank (Vitale), in his late 20s, and Johnny (Sutherland), a 12-year-old boy. This friendship comes increasingly to trouble Johnny's liberal but conventional parents, Ann and Dave (Sutherland). It even troubles the gay community on the Main where Frank hangs out. A parallel story explores the troubled courtship between Bozo (Allan Moyle), Frank's best friend, and Jackie (Holden), a young woman visiting the Sutherlands. These intertwining narratives gravitate around two opposing worlds, two competitive philosophical attitudes. The existentialist position represented by Bozo and his gay friends, Stephen (Lack) and Peter (Brawley), doesn't assume it knows the emotional priorities of existence. These characters discover their emotions through experience, by acting out different roles—in Bozo's case, often with sadistic insistence. The essentialist position, on the other hand, represented by Jackie and the Sutherlands, assumes that the emotional priorities of human nature are a given. One simply has to mature into them. Caught between these life assumptions are both Johnny and Fran—Johnny because, at 12 years of age, he is not yet an independent agent, and Frank, because he is so afraid of who he is and of what he might become. These two attitudes are crosscut throughout the film, often with ironic effect.

The film opens with a sense of personal relationships as a battleground. As the camera moves toward the outside of Frank's loft on St. Lawrence Boulevard—the Montreal Main of the title—we hear Frank and Pammy (Marchant) shouting at one another. He is trying to get her to leave. When we move inside, we see Frank exchanging money with someone (does it concern drugs?) and we recognize that Pammy is a distressed junkie obviously into the hard stuff. Pammy represents a limit beyond which Frank won't go. He wants her out. This scene is followed by Ann Sutherland on the telephone, her groceries on the counter, as if to suggest that each group has its preferred means of communication and its need for a particular kind of supplies. Similarly, in a later scene, we watch Peter and Stephen making up as drag queens, dressing up for a night out on the Main; in a previous scene we saw the Sutherlands getting ready for *their* party—dressing down by washing, grooming and by Ann shaving her legs. The Sutherland party brings about the encounter between Frank and Johnny. Bozo is having a good time, coming on to Jackie; but Frank is gloomy and alone, wanting to go home. When he drifts upstairs simply to look around, he peers through a door to see a creature with long hair reading about call girls in a magazine. Is this creature a girl or a boy? Frank dons an African mask that is hanging nearby and approaches from behind. When Johnny looks around, their eventual encounter startles them both as it startles spectators. Silent close-ups abruptly end the scene.

Since all their friends are gay, Frank and Bozo feel that they too should be gay; but their attempts lead only to embarrassment. During a night scene in Frank's beat-up Volkswagen van when they are trying, unsuccessfully, to masturbate one another, there's a decontextualized cutaway to Bozo talking about Frank: "What he'd really like," Bozo declares, "is the rush of what it must be like to be a homo for an hour." With Bozo, apparently, nothing is serious. With Frank, on the other hand, everything is. Because Frank is a photographer, he arranges to take Johnny up on the mountain for a photographic session. In the style of the 1970s, Johnny is very feminine. With his long hair and gaunt face, he looks more like his mother than his father. At first Johnny is shy, resistant to the camera. They start to play games. They build a citadel of wooden matches—literally playing with fire. Then they spin coins in a café and generally hang out together, becoming friends. The scene ends with Frank taking Johnny's picture again, the film's camera moving in on a close-up of his face, this time relaxed and trustful.

Whatever one's value system, this extended scene between Frank and Johnny depicts a beautiful exploration of friendship. The nuances between them are delicately handled and for non-professional actors, the performances are extraordinary. If the relationship between Frank and Johnny provides the moral centre of the film, the ethical centre could be located in three pivotal scenes between Jackie and Bozo. The first occurs in a department store. The two of them are still close as they kibitz among the consumer goods. He wants to buy her something silly, like the lapel flowers they exchange later on. She wants to know how long they will be together. He wants to play; she wants to be serious. As elsewhere in the film, Bozo favours the improvisational, Jackie the predictable. At this stage, the way spectators react to these issues will affect the way they react to the characters.

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The second scene occurs in a shopping mall. Stephen has been baiting Jackie in a way she doesn't understand. She stomps off, and Bozo runs after her. He tries to persuade her that they were just having fun. Jackie still feels humiliated and annoyed. The third scene takes place on a wintry roof top. There is now a chill in the air. "You're a big joke, Jackie," Bozo shouts at her. "You're like the Sutherlands, all hip on the outside, scared and nervous on the inside." She in turn can no longer stand what she calls "his supercilious smirk." He can't stand the "high-pitched righteous tone" she thrusts at him. The scene ends with Bozo screaming at her that she will never understand "what's happening in the emotional lives around you." At this stage in the film, Bozo is not likeable. His improvisational style perpetually migrates into a personalized theatre of cruelty. He can be as hurtful with Frank as he was with a couple of teenage girls he set out to humiliate in his van. He is, indeed, as Bill Kuhns once observed, an "impresario of scorn."² Nevertheless, what he says to Jackie strikes home. Hurtful in intent, his comments register an integrity—at least to his own feelings. Jackie, on the other hand, might seem to be living in a classic Sartrean way; in "bad faith," in emotional inauthenticity.³ Whether or not we like the way they occur, Bozo's accusations are hard to dismiss.

Full of equivocal relationships, *Montreal Main* constructs a world of moral ambivalence. On one level, it's a love story, exploring, as Natalie Edwards wrote at the time, "the diversity of sexuality, the shades and shifts lying inherent and unacknowledged in all people."⁴ On another level, it extends outwards toward allegory—toward a philosophical investigation of the world. Fragmented in style, swish panning its way from close-up to close-up, Erich Bloch's camera work creates a sense of hysterical excitement. Reinforcing the improvisational nature of the action, the grab-shot technique suggests a world in which attention is uncertain and perception unclear. Lacking parsable narrative sequences, the style perfectly parallels the feelings of isolation that a clutch of gays might have felt at the time in a straight world or that anglophones might have felt within a culture that was becoming insistently francophone. Even the rap patter of Stephen Lack suggests a world in which words have lost their social efficacy; and the uncertain sexual preferences of Bozo and Frank might convey the sense of an existential terror, especially for Frank. Unlike Bozo who, in his opportunistic way, preys upon whatever happens to be around, Frank is a timid idealist, always looking for something different from his day-to-day life, perhaps something impossible—like an intimacy with Johnny. He is frightened by loneliness—a fear re-enforced by the many cut-aways in this film to aging faces in isolation, suggesting the desolation of unattached old age.



If the film begins with domestic violence between Frank and Pammy, toward the end we have two additional scenes of violence intercut with one another. Frank and Bozo have an angry quarrel in a deli, while Dave and Johnny have one in the car—both of these scenes suggest the hurtful undertow of an unrealizable love. Having been discouraged by his friends and forbidden by Dave, Frank agrees to stop seeing Johnny. But Johnny is more courageous. He slips away and visits Frank's loft, declaring he wants to live there. They go for a walk and, when Frank sends Johnny into a restaurant to buy Cokes, Frank abandons him. The scene ends with Johnny running through the streets and back lots of east-end Montreal, at one point dropping the bottles of Coke while the music of Beverly Glenn-Copeland, as it had once before, moralizes the theme of the film, even acknowledging its gender uncertainty: *And up and up the streets we roam, We are lookin', roamin' and a-lookin', And up and up the hills we run, We are lookin', climbin' and a-lookin', For something to get us there, Anywhere... Brother, Sister—Who do you think you are?*

The film itself ends with Bozo comforting Frank, and then with a return to a games arcade. It's full of old men who also are a-lookin', without comprehension, at nothing at all. The camera then picks up Johnny, also by himself, shooting away his hurt at electronic targets, his future uncertain.

Montreal Main is an extraordinary film. Naturalistic in appearance, it has the air of making itself up as it goes along. Yet every image in the film and every element of its style possess the resonance of metaphor. Everything is what it is and yet, like the classic NFB documentaries of the 1950s, suggests other things. A "shooting star" within English-Canadian production in Montreal at that time, as Michel Euvrard has described it, appearing "with neither ancestors nor progeny,"⁵ made by actual people at least in part about the realities of their lives, *Montreal Main* enacts a philosophy of uncertainty. Within this uncertainty, Frank yearns for the consolations of a forbidden love. He doesn't want to become one of the old men in the arcade. What Johnny offered him was unquestioning trust. Not certain himself whether his love for Johnny was erotic or big brotherly, Frank had to betray that trust. The relationship was not to be. The film confirms the uncertainty that most of the characters feel and that Jackie and the Sutherlands are too afraid to acknowledge. As the credits roll, Beverly Glenn-Copeland sings out again her final refrain: *Brother, Sister—Who do you think you are?* TAKE ONE

Notes:

1. *Film Canadiana* (Ottawa: The Canadian Film Institute, 1975–6).
2. *Take One*, July 1974, p. 30.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre "On the Psychoanalytic Theory of Emotions." *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Translated by Philip Mairet (New York: Methuen, 1962).
4. *Cinema Canada*, August/September 1974, p. 78.
5. *Le Dictionnaire du cinéma québécois*. Edited by Michel Coulombe and Marcel Jean (Montréal: Boréal, 1988), p. 474.