



Roads Not Taken,
Avenues Not Explored

by
Peter Harcourt

Confessions of an Unconscious
Canonizer

Docu-drama is an indigenous Canadian cinematic mode, although there are other things. There have always been other things. But back in the 1970s, many of us didn't see fully the variety that was about us. Many of us couldn't see the wood for the trees. The trees we were looking at, however, were particularly exciting. Although the soil in which they grew was undernourished and constantly in need of attention, the trees that were beginning to grow were distinctly Canadian. Their bark and foliage seemed especially suited to the wintry aporias of our native land.



Objectivity was not a striking characteristic of this period. Although both *The Drylanders* and *À tout prendre* had been made in 1963, as had *Pour la suite du monde*, one enthusiastic commentator – me – implied that everything began in 1964! But these were exciting times. They were times of celebration. There was so much that had to be done, so many films that had to be written about. And what we wrote about often had to do with what we were able to see.

In those days, the National Film Board was a source of inspiration. There was nothing like it in either Great Britain or the United States; and other film boards as had been established in such settler societies as Australia and New Zealand hadn't produced nearly the same range or quality of films. In the 1970s, for those of us who were beginning to champion the Canadian cause, the Film Board was understandably a source of immense pride. It was also a source of free films.

At least for anglophone films! The francophone films, on the other hand – even the most prestigious – tended not to be versioned or were deformed in the process. The thoroughly canonized *Le chat dans le sac* could not have become so celebrated in English Canada had it not been for the foresight of Guy Coté, the director of what was then the Cinémathèque canadienne. He had prepared a subtitled copy of this film as part of a touring package for our centennial celebrations in 1967. But *Pour la suite du monde* still exists in the general catalogue only in a version called *Moontrap*, shortened by 20 minutes with its authenticity destroyed by the chirpy voice of Stanley Jackson imposed over all the québécois voices of the island inhabitants. To be fair to the Film Board, this was the first title that they so versioned and they made a lot of mistakes. Subsequently, by using an older voice more sparingly, they did a much better job with *Un pays sans bon sens!* (1970). It is worth noting, however, that when we watch the English versions of classic documentaries such as *La lutte* (1961) or *Bûcherons de la Manouane* (1962), these films are to a degree deformed by the English commentary that is far more prominent than in the francophone original and that “steps in” all the time to “explain” what the French “peasants” are saying, thereby compounding the po-

GENEVIEVE BUJOLD AND DIRECTOR PAUL ALMOND ON LOCATION FOR **ISABEL:** HIS FILMS POSSESS A SPIRITUAL INTIMACY AND A SERIOUSNESS OF PURPOSE THAT HAS BEEN BANISHED FROM VIRTUALLY ALL OF NORTH AMERICAN CINEMA – IF NOT FROM NORTH AMERICAN LIFE

litical ironies of a film like *Bûcherons!*

By now, the clichés are well established. Nevertheless, in spite of the real problems of cost and availability, in his already classic discussion of canon formation, "In Our Own Eyes," Peter Morris is right in detecting a political agenda among many commentators of that period. Morris devises three categories that he claims served to establish our cultural priorities: the recognition of familiar places within our nation; a realist style; and a recurring thematic concern – especially with failure and with the depiction of Canadian males.

I agree with Morris that this journey of self-discovery must once again be undertaken. Not only do we need to be more conscious of the ideological assumptions that informed our early priorities but we need now to approach the task in more analytical ways.

While the academic community in this country remains small, especially that concerned with Canadian culture, it is now in place and is already developing traditions of comment far removed from the often boosterist declamations of the early years. As an agenda for this task I would suggest that, along with Morris's three categories that are useful in analyzing the critical priorities of the past, we might think of three additional categories as we begin to re-write this period for the future. Schematically we might call them the Documentary Tradition, the Dramatic Tradition, and the Experimental Tradition. These categories correspond to Bruce Elder's theoretical presentation, "Modes of Representation in the Cinema," which he defines as the Cinema of Presentation, of Illustration, and of Construction.

This different map might encourage a different set of priorities. If we now look back over the past, what roads might we

discover that were not then taken, what avenues within the Canadian cinematic landscape have been left unexplored?

The Documentary Tradition

Although this tradition has remained the privileged site

for celebration, there is a lot of re-thinking that needs to be done. Even the most outstanding documentaries need to be re-examined with more clearly focused, post-colonial eyes.

Whatever the possible exaggerations of the book as a whole, *The Colonized Eye* by Joyce Nelson offers an astute examination of the wartime work in Canada of the mighty John Grierson. She is concerned with the issue of voice. She argues that the Canadian films lacked a distinct voice of their own. Whereas the wartime documentaries in Great Britain



MICHELINE LANCTÔT IN GILLES CARLE'S *LA VRAIE NATURE DE BERNADETTE*: THE INDISPUTABLE MASTERPIECE OF HIS EARLY PERIOD



GENEVIÈVE BUJOLD IN PAUL ALMOND'S **THE ACT OF THE HEART: IT PRESENTS THE TENSIONS INVOLVED IN THE SWITCH-OVER FROM A SACRED TO A SECULAR SOCIETY** JUDY WELCH IN WILLIAM DAVIDSON'S **NOW THAT APRIL'S HERE: THE DRAMATIC TRADITION WAS ALMOST TOTALLY DISREGARDED BY THE IMPASSIONED CANONIZERS OF THE 1970S.**

showed people going about their work and speaking to one another, the documentaries made in Canada showed people going about their work and being *talked about* by a great white father with the stentorian voice of the ubiquitous Lorne Greene.

Similarly, in the work of the much celebrated Unit B, distinguished though those films are, they also embody, arguably, a colonized sensibility. The very qualities that have been so acclaimed – their sense of detachment and their reflective tone – are qualities

that are permissible within cultural situations somewhat removed from a full political engagement in the actualities of the historical world. This is an aspect of their work that Elder was on to years ago, although he failed to put it in terms that many people could readily understand.

This feeling of disorientation in the face of experience, leading to what Elder called “a form of consciousness that is so alienated from the world that its sole activity is passive observation,” informs many of the feature films that can be

related to this tradition, from *Nobody Waved Good-bye* (1964) to *Goin' Down the Road* (1970). By re-reading these films more in terms of the actuality of particular social situations than in thematic terms concerning the “essence” of Canada, a more precise understanding can be achieved regarding the reason that these films have been so consistently acclaimed.

Even within the documentary tradition, moreover, there have been films that have been substantially overlooked. While Piers Handling made an attempt

to re-establish the worth of the films of Larry Kent in a key article published in *Cinema Canada*, no one has yet re-examined David Secter's *Winter Kept Us Warm* (1965). Along with Sydney Furie's *A Dangerous Age* (1958) and William Davidson's *Now That April's Here* (1958) – two films cited by Morris – perhaps these films have been ignored largely because of print unavailability but also because they belong more to the dramatic than to the documentary tradition – a tradition that was almost totally disregarded by the impassioned canonizers of the 1970s.

More serious omissions, however, occur within the québécois scene, almost all of which have to do with the lack of versioning. While reviewing a number of early Quebec features for my article, “Naissance du direct: 1960-1970,” in *Les cinémas du Canada*, I was struck by the originality of some of the work.

In so many ways the seminal québécois feature is *Seul ou avec d'autres* (1962), a work jointly conceived and directed by three people who were at that time students at the Université de Montréal. The names of these students were to resound to the present day within the cultural life of Quebec – Stéphane Venne in music, and Denis Héroux and Denys Arcand in film. Furthermore, other names, soon to become important for québécois cinema appeared in the credits of this film: Michel Brault as cinematographer; Gilles Groulx as editor; Marcel Carrière on sound; and Marie-José Raymond, soon to become an important producer, appears as an actress in this film.

Financed by the students' association with a budget of \$24,000, *Seul ou avec d'autres* was as sophomoric in its basic attitudes as other student films made elsewhere in Canada at about the same time. Yet *Seul ou avec d'autres* is interesting not only for the roll call of names about to become important in québécois cinema but also for the stylish way in which it adapted the techniques of *le cinéma direct* to feature filmmaking.

Although no one in Quebec much liked it at the time, seen today, this film devised by three men seems exceptional in its decision to establish a young woman (Nicole Braun) as the central protagonist in the story and to allow her voice-off almost as much time within the commentary as the voice-off of her young lover (Pierre Létourneau). *Seul ou avec d'autres* thus provides a gentle and partly female beginning to fiction feature filmmaking during this new period of

growing self-awareness in Quebec.

Although reference could also be made to *Trouble-fête* (1964), directed by Pierre Patry from a script he wrote with Jean-Claude Lord, it belongs more securely within the dramatic tradition than with any style of filmmaking that derives from the direct. Similarly, as I shall discuss below, *À tout prendre* (1963) is a hybrid film that belongs in part within the experimental tradition, as do the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre.

The Dramatic Tradition

If the documentary tradition derives largely from the National Film Board, in English Canada the dramatic tradition derives

celebrated for what it now most certainly is: a courageous and most original attempt to achieve an imaginative cinema in Canada that might have some of the troubling psychological resonance of the films of Ingmar Bergman.

The three films that he made in the 1960s all intersect with the French-Canadian situation in interesting and challenging ways. *Isabel* (1968) is set in the Shigawake region of the Gaspé peninsula; *The Act of the Heart* (1970), takes place largely in Montreal and provides cameo roles for well-known québécois figures such as Gilles Vigneault and Claude Jutra; and *Journey* (1972) was filmed near Tadoussac and features both actually and symbolically the mighty Saguenay river.

The Act of the Heart presents the tensions involved in the switchover from a sacred to a secular society with more



from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. This is a tradition nurtured throughout the glory days of television drama, in which new Canadian works would alternate with the best of world theatre, allowing young Canadian television directors to hone their craft.

The most distinguished embodiment of this tradition is the thoroughly uncanonized Paul Almond; but it is important to recognize that prodigious talents like Norman Jewison and Ted Kotcheff got their start at the CBC, as did Ron Kelly whose *Waiting for Caroline* (1967) also needs to be dusted off and re-examined.

But it is Paul Almond's “fantastic trilogy” that most desperately needs to be

force and sensitivity than any French-language film of that period would have dared to do. But even *Isabel*, with splendid cinematography by Georges Dufaux, presents some of the same tensions within the landscape of the Gaspé Peninsula and it does so with enormous sensitivity and evocative effect.

All three films are concerned with rites of passage – more particularly with a change of consciousness centred on the character of a young woman, in each film played by Geneviève Bujold.

These films of Paul Almond now seem extraordinary. Their sense of the symbolic resonance of landscape, of nature, of psychological inwardness, and of season-

al change make them peculiarly Québécois. They all aspire to a metaphysical dimension, which is the reason that the anglophone press always found them pretentious. Looked at today, however, even if not totally successful, these films possess a spiritual intimacy and a seriousness of purpose that has been banished from virtually all of North American cinema – if not from North American life. Certainly, they register a talent and an intelligence that was never allowed to develop. They were too much ahead of their time.

It is now hard to realize that some of the major literary work of Anne Hébert, that *Isabel* so resembles, *actually follows the production of that film!* Especially given the stylistic distortions of Yves Simenon's version of *Les fous de bassan*, any reconsideration of the prophetic value of *Isabel* could see it as anticipating

The Experimental Tradition

If the dramatic tradition has been undervalued, the experimental tradition has been ignored. This category is complex. It encompasses quite different practices in Quebec and in English Canada.

Indeed, within québécois production, such experimental work as did occur took place within narrative. With the singular exception of Vincent Grenier, who quickly moved to the United States, the experimental tradition, or the Cinema of Construction, has always been a mixed mode in Quebec.

remains unknown in English Canada.

But the *locus classicus* of neglect is Claude Jutra. His work has been both overrated and undervalued. His two most accomplished films (and the least experimental), *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971) and *Kamouraska* (1973), are adaptations and were shot by Michel Brault – a cinematographer who detectably co-directs everything he shoots. Jutra's most personal and "experimental" films, on the other hand, *À tout prendre* (1963) and *Pour le meilleur et le pire* (1975) have only been intermittently available with subtitled copies.

If *Mon oncle Antoine* is perhaps the most beloved of all québécois films, it is perhaps because it reconfirms, at least on one level, English Canada's notion of the Québécois as happy peasants, locked away in their Catholic village of asbestos and snow. The film is more than this,



POUR LA SUITE DU MONDE (LEFT) AND THE DRYLANDERS: IF WE NOW LOOK BACK OVER THE PAST, WHAT ROADS MIGHT WE DISCOVER THAT WERE NOT THEN TAKEN, WHAT AVENUES WITHIN THE CANADIAN CINEMATIC LANDSCAPE HAVE BEEN LEFT UNEXPLORED?

certainly; but its popularity in English Canada may well be related to the stereotypes that it so lovingly recreates.

Nevertheless, it is true, as Morris has suggested, that *À tout prendre* was undervalued because it didn't embody the kind of politics that English Canadians wanted to find in québécois cinema at that time. A facetious film, perhaps a narcissistic film, it didn't seem to speak for the collectivity of Quebec.

In English Canada throughout the seventies, many of us were envious of what appeared to be the greater certainties of Quebec. Unlike many English Canadians, the Québécois seemed to know who they were. *À tout prendre* was a challenge to us because it was so much about uncertainty.

Unlike Claude in *Le chat dans le sac*, Claude in this film doesn't know whether he is straight or gay. He may also not know whether he is English or French. The film begins with him extolling the pleasures of *Life* magazine; and at the end, he flies away to London. Finally, does the closing freeze-frame on the Haitian sugar cutters, their machetes raised as if in anger, register a revolution to come or simply an escape into a fantasy world, as perhaps his entire relationship with Johanne had been?

It is because these moral dilemmas remain unresolved in the film that *À tout*

within Quebec what we might describe as Gaspésie Gothic.

This part of our film history, Québécois but largely anglophone, most desperately needs to be thoroughly re-evaluated, as do some of the early "maple syrup" porn films. If not great works of art, they can surely be reread as symptomatic cultural texts. *Valérie* (1968) is especially important, in the way that it presents a young woman who escapes the religion of the Catholic church only to espouse the religion of québécois consumer capitalism, re-enforced by a whole battery of québécois flags. *Valérie* is an extraordinarily symptomatic if not prophetic cultural text!

For instance, all the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre are informed by this practice, as are the films of Gilles Carle. In terms of the canon, Carle's work is peculiar. Although it has been the recipient of two English language *auteur* studies, Carle's work remains outside the canon because, like so much of Lefebvre's, it has not been properly visioned.

The indisputable masterpiece of his early period, *La vraie nature de Bernadette* (1972) – the film that, incidentally, first launched the magnificent Micheline Lanctôt – remains unsubtitled for general distribution. Thus like Lanctôt's own *Sonatine* (1984), it

prendre seemed confusing when it first came out. It is now in desperate need of a thorough reevaluation – whether for better or worse!

In English Canada, the true experimental tradition – Elder’s Cinema of Construction – has operated outside of narrative, constructing works that might be said to constitute the poetry if not (indeed) the philosophy of cinema. It is important to situate the work of Norman McLaren within this tradition. As an innovator who represents one of the most “modernist” artists who ever worked in film, he is also one of our artists that has been most thoroughly overlooked.

But the experimental tradition is established by a roll call of internationally celebrated names. Jack Chambers, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, David Rimmer, and Bruce Elder comprise the senators of this tradition; but it also involves intricate work by other practitioners such as Rick Hancox, Chris Gallagher, Barbara Sternberg, Philip Hoffmann, Richard Kerr, and many others. That the work of these people constitutes an avant garde within Canadian cinematic practice which is valued throughout the world is immensely important. But it is also important for the indirect influence it has had – for the technical conscience it represents and for the formal authority it implies.

The failure of *The Far Shore* (1976) in English Canada, like the failure of *Isabel* before it, was the result of the inability of most critics to accept such a stylized, “experimental” treatment of characters and theme within what offered itself as a theatrical film; and the failure of that film to attract much critical attention was the result of the fact that, until recently, there was no 16mm print available for academic study. Looked at today, however – again like *Isabel* – it seems to anticipate the work of women filmmakers, like Patricia Rozema, which now enjoys considerable acclaim.

If (as I have argued elsewhere) the most achieved films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre possess some of the same austerity as the works of Michael Snow, so – arguably – does the work of Atom Egoyan. Wrestling with the perennial problem (not easy to deal with) concerning *what his films might mean*, Bart Testa has recently suggested that *Speaking Parts* (1989) is about betrayal. While

certainly a number of betrayals occur in this film, to claim that it is “about” betrayal is a bit like suggesting that *Wavelength* (1967) is “about” a murder. As much as anything, Egoyan’s films are “about” the deployment of their own formal strategies, even though these strategies are operating within the narrative mode.

At the moment, Egoyan’s case is exceptional. He has been thoroughly canonized before he has been understood. This too has to do, in part, with print availability. Students wishing to



CLAUDE JUTRA (ABOVE), ACTOR AND DIRECTOR IN *À TOUT PRENDRE*: HIS WORK HAS BEEN BOTH OVERRATED AND UNDER-VALUED

examine his work can go off to their local video outlets and hire virtually the complete works of Atom Egoyan – as they can the works of Jean-Claude Lauzon or the recent films of Denys Arcand. This is not true of the classic films from our past, as it is not true today of filmmakers like Bill MacGilivray who work outside the major distribution system.

If the true experimental films remain underknown and undercelebrated, nevertheless in this country that tradition has lent a rigour to other, more mainstream films. While not working entirely within Elder’s Cinema of Construction, from the experimental tradition they have gained both innovation and discipline which have taken them along a far more challenging avenue than the classic films of the 1960s that sprang from the

tradition of documentary and of the presentational strategies of the direct.

Conclusion

None of these three traditions, like none of Elder’s modes, is complete onto itself. If the most complex works by Bruce Elder very much embody the Cinema of Construction, since they too take place over time – over often an extended period of time – they also involve a dimension of narrative as waves of image and sound creation follow each other and recapitulate one another. Moreover, even the simplest of observational films involves elements of construction and therefore (I would argue) partake to a degree of Elder’s Cinema of Illustration.

Canadian film today, in whatever language, has never been healthier. With the multiplicity of voices represented by people such as Deepa Mehta, Srinivas Krishna, Clement Virgo and, of course, Atom Egoyan, through its own initiative Canadian film has become more international in appeal. With the acclaimed success in the United States of *The Boys of St. Vincent* and of *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould* and with the (at the moment of writing) most encouraging statistic that Egoyan’s *Exotica* has brought in domestically three times as much money at the box-office as Woody Allen’s *Bullets Over Broadway*, we can all take pride in the achievement of the cinema that some of us have been a long time

encouraging.

No matter how varied the forest, however, and how rich the foliage, no matter how much more nourishing now the soil in which our cinematic trees can grow, a myopic gangle of idiots in Ottawa could always close down the system and dry up the land. We must never abandon the struggle. For those of us who care about Canadian culture and Canadian film, we must make sure that the gains of the last 15 years are not eroded.

Canada is, at least in sentiment, still our own country. We must make sure that it goes on producing crops that culturally will nourish future generations, that it continues to produce works worthy of the Canadian canon ●

Peter Harcourt teaches film studies at CARLETON UNIVERSITY.