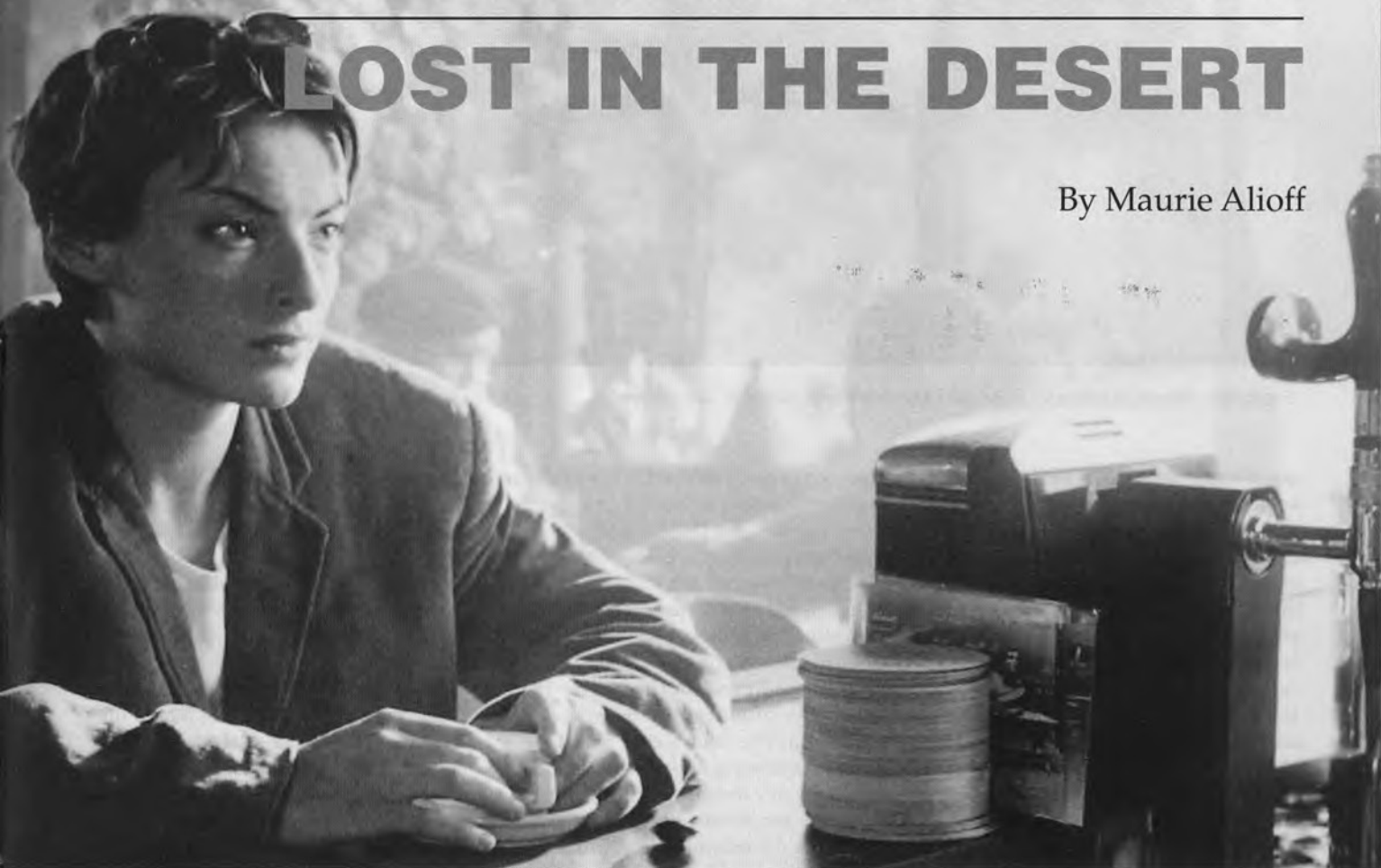


Denis Villeneuve's Un 32 août sur terre

LOST IN THE DESERT

By Maurie Alioff



photos courtesy of France Films.

Some would say that Quebec's Roger Frappier's new find, Denis Villeneuve, is the 1990s model of the producer's celebrated collaborator, Denys Arcand. Like Arcand, the 30-year-old Villeneuve spent his childhood in a riverside village and then moved on to Montreal to pursue his formal education. During the early 1960s, Arcand studied history before turning to cinema; 20 years later, Villeneuve's fascination with entomology segued into a commitment to making movies.

Like Arcand, Villeneuve did time at the National Film Board, where he made *REW FFWD* in 1994, a striking, point-of-view short that explores fascination and fear during a ganja-clouded tour of Kingston's Trench Town. This antitravelogue was a natural follow-up to the novice director's work on *La Course autour du monde*, a Radio-Canada TV show that sent young people around the world to shoot five-minute videos. Over a six-month period, Villeneuve made 20 little films in various European and Asian locations and eventually took the program's top award. At the Film Board Villeneuve assisted the venerated documentarian Pierre Perrault on a film shot near the North Pole. While the young moviemaker learned a great deal from this and

other experiences, again, like Arcand, he wasn't entirely happy with the Board. Villeneuve told me one afternoon in June that being at the NFB "was like being in an egg. They think that there's nobody else in the world but them. It's a place that says it's open to the world, but they're really closed in on themselves."

Along with many other ambitious filmmakers who emerged in the 1990s, Villeneuve had his rock-video phase, shooting prize-winning "clips" for musicians like Richard Séguin, Daniel Bélanger and France d'Amour. He says he enjoyed the speed, the money and the opportunity "to learn and explore." Moreover, his rock videos brought him together with present-day collaborators like the talented DOP/director André Turpin and eventually attracted the attention of Frappier.

Frappier was less fond of the cerebral *REW FFWD* than the videos which, in 1995, led the producer to add Villeneuve's name to a list of six young filmmakers who made up last year's anthology picture, *Cosmos*. Villeneuve's contribution to the movie was a cleverly shot piece (lots of fancy *travellings* by Turpin) about an earnestly arty filmmaker who descends into a

Denis Villeneuve's *un 32 août sur*



From left: Alexis Martin and Pascale Bussièrès with director Villeneuve.



Pascale Bussièrès as Simone.

mindless rock-video station that is somehow also a hairdressing salon. "I was the last *Cosmos* person before the door closed," Villeneuve said, making it clear that in his opinion Frappier is a mentor to die for. "Roger has a very powerful energy, a lot of ardor and spirit. Nobody trusted me the way he did." According to Villeneuve, Frappier "likes to put his hands on everything from the script, to casting, to the final product. He's always asking you questions and is very demanding. It's a great way of learning. Roger is like a rock. It's good to have somebody like him when there are problems." For instance, when actor Alexis Martin, Villeneuve's only choice for the male lead in his first feature, *Un 32 août sur terre*, was unavailable for a summer 1997 shoot, Frappier postponed filming for two months.

After travelling to Cannes (where *Un 32 août sur terre* did well in the festival's Un Certain Regard section and Frappier was honoured in a special homage to producers), Villeneuve is now ensconced in his mentor's company, Max Films. As he bangs away at a new script he says is too raw to talk about, he prays that he will never again have to direct a rock video. "I hate them," he snaps. "They impose images on people who should be imagining the music themselves." When it comes to bread-and-butter advertising shoots, "I can't make an image if it was not profoundly important to me. I got real

happy when I realized I couldn't do commercials."

Villeneuve's first really hot movie encounter as a comic book loving 17-year-old was with *Star Wars*. He is now something of a traditionalist and doesn't entirely approve of John Woo or Quentin Tarantino, but venerates 1960s art-house auteurs like Bergman and Antonioni. The latter's cool portrayal of psycho-spiritual urban estrangement, especially in *Zabriskie Point*, is an obvious influence on Villeneuve's enigmatically titled *Un 32 août sur terre* (in English, *August 32nd on Earth*). The unsettled wanderings of the film's 20-something heroine, Simone (Pascale Bussièrès), echo Monica Vitti's rambles through the empty streets of *The Eclipse* and *Red Desert*. At the same time, Simone's relentless self-assurance, not to mention her pixie haircut, are among the film's many allusions to Jean Seberg in Godard's *Breathless*. For Villeneuve, the airily alluring actress, and the movie itself, encapsulate the French New Wave's "liberty, freedom and breath. [It was] very playful and insolent." Like *Breathless*, *Un 32 août sur terre* is a "story about dysfunctional love involving a girl with a lot of character."

The movie opens on a crisply shot, tautly edited sequence in which Simone speeds along a deserted highway, falling asleep at the wheel and awakening upside-

down in her demolished car. Unlike David Cronenberg's *Crash* highway victims, Simone gets no kicks from a crash. In a long, wordless sequence, she shifts emotional gears from panic to firm survival mode. Then, when she returns to Montreal, the uninjured photo model decides to quit her agency, cancel a professional trip to Italy, and seek out a meaningful experience in the face of life's fragility. ("No one's life is eternally eternal," muses Simone.) We are led to understand that this chic, somewhat vacant yuppie feels oppressed (like Monica Vitti in *The Red Desert* or Juliette Binoche in Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Bleu*) by the soulless urban world she lives in.

Un 32 août sur terre's opening sequence alternates shots of its heroine framed by country fields and pristine skies with images of her hemmed in by electric power transformers, clutters of garish commercial buildings and noisy traffic. The images are "a reflection of the mental landscape of the character," Villeneuve tells me, "as well as a commentary about the urban landscape, a reflection of urban stagnation." The director, whose rural childhood neighbourhood featured a nuclear power plant looming on the horizon of flat country fields, is fascinated by ominous pairings of the natural with the mechanical. The accident in the movie occurs, according to Villeneuve, at a juncture of "different universes that coexist next to each other," a frontier

terre LOST IN THE DESERT



Alexis Martin as Philippe.



Director Denis Villeneuve.

between the countryside, the suburbs and a technological desert that shows “no respect for humans.”

Itching to seek out life in this wasteland, Simone hits on a plan that sets up the movie's nebulous premise. She calls up an old boyfriend, Philippe (Alexis Martin), and asks him to conceive a baby with her. In a madcap scene—probably meant to suggest the intoxicating spontaneity of Godard gems like *Une Femme est une femme* and *Bande à part*—the furtive, jittery Philippe agrees, providing he can knock her up in an actual—not a metaphorical—desert. Following a quick check of maps and an airline databank, the odd couple makes a travel choice that falls within the movie's budget. Simone and Philippe jet off to Utah, the desert location closest to Montreal.

From this point on, *Un 32 août sur terre* slips into a mode that crosses an existential road movie with a Gen-X relationship/dropout comedy. Acting out in the liberating no-time suggested by the movie's title (August 32 is followed by August 33, etc.), the two crazy kids land in Salt Lake City and get taxied out to vast, blindingly white flats that would put a damper on any kind of sex. The situation gets more awkward when Simone and Philippe are stranded on the Salt Flats by the crooked and brutal cab driver. Alone in the blistering heat and infinite space, the duo discover a

mysteriously charred corpse, confront each other, and conclude that they live in “a world [that makes] less and less sense. It's falling apart.” They return to what passes for civilization, get loaded on mesal in a Japanese-style airport sleep cubicle and return to Montreal. Instead of conceiving a new life, Philippe is victimized in a random act of meaningless violence.

Somewhere during the desert sequences, *Un 32 août sur terre* starts to lose its nervous energy and peter out, probably because the characters, and the serio-comic premise, do not reach their full potential. On the other hand, Villeneuve rarely falters when it comes to camera placement and movement or cutting together a seamless montage. Simone and Philippe achieve their most intimate moments when surrounded by vast, foreboding empty space, a paradoxical situation that hints at Villeneuve's ambivalence toward natural and technological deserts: “My reaction to deserts has nothing to do with romance, or travelling, or the spirit of adventure. It puts me into a very basic Zen state. I don't feel at home anywhere else in the world.”

Following the busy pyrotechnics of his *Cosmos* episode, *Un 32 août sur terre* is a minimalist two-hander, reflecting Villeneuve's yearning for stripped-down simplicity. He says he wrote the first draft fast and “instinctively” in

pursuit of a story that was “pure, simple and sober, in reaction against the cinema of puzzles.” For Villeneuve, the “cinema of puzzles” is what you get from directors like Atom Egoyan and Robert Lepage. “Cinema is not about clues, and I don't think life has as many connections as it does in a film by Egoyan, where everything is ultra-justified and connected, like in a puzzle. I admire Egoyan's work, but what seduces me more is a story with an emotional thrust, where the structure is very pure.” For Villeneuve, a movie like *Zabriskie Point* “seems closer to life, closer to the essence of things. It's more elegant filmmaking than flashy films or stories that meander.”

“For a long time,” Villeneuve tells me, “I wanted to do a sequence where you could take out the sound and the imagery tells the story. I don't like literary cinema where the characters are always explaining themselves.” As we talked about Québécois moviemakers of the 1960s and '70s as compared to his generation's, Villeneuve pinpoints a fundamental difference. Directors like him may admire their predecessors, but think of themselves pushing the medium further. “Arcand is a great scriptwriter and director,” says Villeneuve, “but visually, he's not very inventive. *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* is almost like a radio play.” ●