

# Homage to Pierre Perrault

Vous triste nostalgie d'un pays perdu

By Isa Tousignant

You can only look over your shoulder for so long before you get a crick in your neck. I should have remembered that in the café, the other day, when I was not-so-subtly eavesdropping on the conversation at the next table. It had been a while since I'd last witnessed a separation debate. Outsiders, I quickly concluded. No Québécois in their right mind would introduce the subject. No, wait, that's not entirely true; there are the pioneers. Pierre Perrault, for example; Quebec's most cherished documentarist who sadly passed away last June 24. He dedicated nearly two-thirds of his life to the cause of Quebec's liberation. I keep forgetting about the pioneers.

As much a poet as a politician, philosopher and filmmaker, Perrault strove for 40 years to make the people of Quebec appreciate the unique nobility of our culture. His chosen medium, after having contributed in quite a significant way to radio for a few years, was film—technologically minimalist, “portrait”-style documentary film. His cinematic approach has been termed *cinéma direct*, *cinéma du réel* or *cinéma de la parole*. Perrault personally preferred the term *cinéma vécu*, or “lived cinema,” but his life-long dislike of definition, classification and pinpointing makes even this term unreliable. He refused to be associated with any given film school or movement, summing up his position simply by stating his primary intention: “To remain loyal to life, to reproduce reality, to explore that *réalité*.”

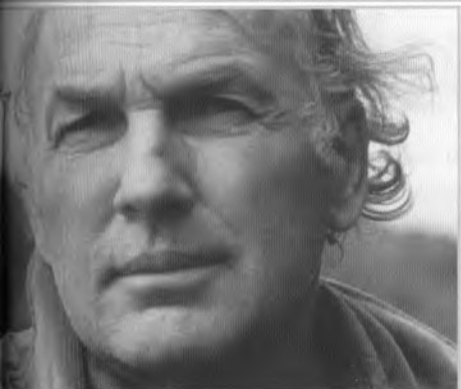
What he deemed real, of course, was very carefully chosen. Perrault's subjects were nearly exclusively rural. They were generally cultivated, mostly through upbringing as opposed to through academic education. They were well-read and open-minded; they were politically aware and active. They represented a system of values that championed history, tradition, humility and sincerity. The Ile-aux-Coudres trilogy, composed of *Pour la suite du monde* (1963), *Le Règne du jour* (1968) and *Les Voitures d'eau* (1969), is perhaps Perrault's best-known body of work, and his earliest in the medium of film. The series played an essential formative role in determining Perrault's creative stance and central theme. It's in these films that the Quebec public was introduced to the now-infamous Tremblay family, a typically huge (Alexis and his four-foot-high wife, Marie, had 17 children and 60-odd grandchildren) and atypically fascinating group of people. They were farmers, and had been for generations; the French they spoke was so close to the 16th-century *vieux français* brought from the motherland by the first settlers that the series' first film was subtitled in French. They welcomed

Perrault and his audience into their kitchens and their lives with unsuspecting warmth. Their joviality and their energy wooed (and continues to woo) the Quebec people; they became iconic of everyone's great-uncle and long-lost cousin. They were real Québécois.

One of the most endearing portraits Perrault painted of them was in *Pour la suite du monde*, which follows them on their path toward reviving the tradition of beluga hunting—a practice instrumental to the area until the the 1920s when it ceased to be a feasible livelihood. The younger Tremblay generation (pressed by Perrault and his NFB crew who initiated the whole enterprise) set out to acquire the village's elders' support and guidance in the hunt, and succeeded. The 20-or-so participants dedicated themselves to the project entirely, working many long days, singing all the while, cracking jokes and arguing about the origin of their trapping technique. (Did it come from the “savages” or their European ancestors?) Once the complex trap was set they waited patiently and worried about the outcome of their efforts. The season was swiftly progressing, with not one beluga in sight. They banded together and prayed to the Good Lord for success.

Finally, they got one. One solitary beluga, sold to the New York Aquarium for \$500. They were disappointed, and so were we. They were expecting so much, they wanted it to be a precedent for the reawakening of a tradition, of one of Quebec's oldest and most particular practices. Their strength, wit and charisma made their failure feel like ours. But, sitting in my living room last week rewatching these nationalistic classics for the first time since high school, I couldn't help but notice the irony of my empathy. It's too late now. Their failure was ours. People like this don't exist anymore. That's what Perrault was telling us: “Wake up, now! They won't be here for long, they're morphing before our eyes!” And by the time we realized what he was saying, it was already too late; we failed to take it seriously enough to keep it from happening, even after hearing his heightened level of panic in films like *L'Acadie, l'Acadie???* (1972). We let it happen. We let the past slip away and looked to the future in a forgiving, perhaps complacent way, refusing, surprisingly to many, to take the course of action suggested by pioneers such as Perrault. Québécois decided, time after time, not to separate: to turn their attention rather to the booming world around them. The pioneers were left without a following.

Perrault realized this, of course, and informed us through his later films of the grave mistake he thought we had made.



Think of *La Bête lumineuse*, produced in 1982, in the wake of 1980's negative referendum. It introduced us to a whole new breed of rural man; no longer the refined, noble people we had seen in Ile-aux-Coudres. These are men who have lost their roots. They have been severed from the umbilical cord of their past and are floating, trying desperately to come to terms with their new reality, in a cold, modern world. They have abandoned the bow and arrow in favour of the shotgun; they have replaced poetry and literature with booze and cruel pranks. These are the new Québécois.

Perrault reveals all this while disregarding the people of the city, the anglophones, the allophones, and all the ethnically diverse people of Quebec. Yes, Perrault's reality certainly was specific. But he loved it limitlessly, and was able to transmit the bug. Hey, even I had a tear in my eye by the end of *Le Règne du jour*, and the rustic way of life usually doesn't hold much appeal to me. Whether it was a tear of discouragement or of true sorrow, I don't really care to know. I think I may be too young to comprehend why Quebec is such a perpetually nostalgic nation, whose ideals rest in the insulated remnants of our 16th-century forefathers. I find it sad, but I find it sadder that people like Perrault weren't able to live to see their dreams come true. Quebec's culture is beautiful and unique, in all its facets. And the one Perrault strove to protect was one of the most special.

Pierre Perrault was a remarkable man; his vision ignited his people's pride and fuelled his country's heart. Oh, and the people from the café? Turns out they were from Vancouver. ●

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