



*"The past is never dead."*

In Michèle Cournoyer's film *Le Chapeau (The Hat)*, an exotic dancer performs in front of shapeless figures with dark hats. As she dances she remembers being abused as a child. The puppet strings of the adult world left this woman/child not far from the womb, skulking through a lightless tunnel. Sex without love; true love lost to the breezes of childhood. The impact of *Le Chapeau* lies in its complexity of emotions. This is not just a film about sexual abuse. It is a film about addiction, love, seduction and emotional manipulation.

For Cournoyer, *Le Chapeau* was a personal battle. For months she struggled with computers and photography – "technological addictions" she calls them – physical demons and creative roadblocks in order to find her film's voice. As she tumbled further into emotional torment, Cournoyer found her Virgil – Dante's guide through the rings of hell in *The Inferno* – in the form of veteran NFB producer/animator, Pierre Hébert (*La Plante humaine*). Hébert's support, encouragement and guidance lifted Cournoyer out of her own circle of hell and closer to creative paradise. The result is one of the darkest, dirtiest and most complex films to emerge from the cold, scrubbed halls of the NFB.

WHERE MEMORIES  
BREATHE DARKNESS

UNDERNEATH LE CHAPEAU  
OF MICHÈLE COURNOYER

BY CHRIS ROBINSON

*Addiction bottles you with the impact of thunderous silence. A force so intense you are swallowed unawares. Existence reduced to extremes. You stagger between moments accompanied by tuneless instruments. Every movement determined by invisible strings. Inevitably you fall short. An evacuation of emotions collapses you into the hopelessness of a stained shirt. You reach an almost peaceful apathy. A mundane aftermath of despair. The echoes of memories are reduced to incomprehensible shadows. You can't see it though you know it could not but be. A life atrophied. You were. You are not. Will you be?*

*It is not even past.*"

William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

Art has always been a fierce struggle for Cournoyer. Whether as a painter, independent animator or NFB filmmaker, she has fought dark shadows throughout her life. She was born in Saint-Joseph-de-Sorel, Quebec, in 1943. While hospitalized for a time at the age of 12, her father brought her an oil paint box and she started painting. (She had been drawing since she was five years old.) However, her formal artistic education was put on hold at the age of 17 when her mother became seriously ill. She stopped everything to care for her mother and assumed the caregiver role in the domestic sphere. Then her world stopped at age 20 when her mother died. She grew up fast, an ersatz mother for a heartbroken family, which included two brothers and a sister. Still, she painted, printed, drew, sculpted and gave everything to art. She spent two years in Quebec City, moved to Montreal, then headed to London, England, to study graphic design. "I went to 'swinging' London in the 1960s with a \$90 plane ticket and a government grant of \$2,000. I was printing pillows on pillows, pearls on pillows, hands on gloves. There my images started to move with music, and then film came to me one day."

Cournoyer was living in a boarding house where she became friends with a photographer. After seeing the man with his baby, she got the idea to make a simple film called *L'Homme et l'enfant*. It is series of still photos showing the man holding his baby; eventually flowers cover the baby. "I made the film during lunch hours and it was quite natural for me. It was very clear to me that I would continue to make films." Cournoyer lived in a surrealist world where there was always a story in motion. She sent *L'Homme et l'enfant* to the Canada Council and received a grant to make another film that she planned to shoot in Italy. Set in Venice, it was about a young woman who was about to be married, but her veil flies off and blows around the countryside. However, the film never did get made, and Cournoyer returned to Montreal where she found work as a costume designer on *La Vie revêue* (Mireille Dansereau, 1972), *La Mort d'un bucheron* (Gilles Carle, 1973) and *L'Arrache-cœur* (Dansereau, 1979). "It was an important time for me. I also did commercials and paintings."

In 1975, Cournoyer became involved with Atelier Graff, an artist-run co-operative. The co-op made films, painted and held group exhibitions. Cournoyer, however, continued with her own work, but she had very few solo exhibitions because she sold her work to pay the bills. (She has none of these paintings today. All were sold or given away to friends.) More importantly, she continued making her own films. *Spaghetтата* (1971) shows a woman eaten by spaghetti to the accompaniment of the Italian national anthem. "It was a rejection of all things Italian. After living there, I had had enough." As with *L'Homme et l'enfant*, Cournoyer again used collage and photos. *Spaghetтата* was a collaboration with her long-time friend – and NFB animator – Jacques Drouin. Drouin and Cournoyer shot the film in one evening while cooking spaghetti. It was presented as part of a group exhibition in old Montreal. "There was an Italian chef, an art book, a painting of a stove and the projection of my film. It was a crazy, fantastic night."

Her next film, *La Toccata* (1978), was based on the dream of another. A man in a field plays Bach on a piano. A woman slowly emerges from the piano. After a few flirtatious moments, she runs off and cuts into the ground with a knife. Eventually she opens the ground and finds an orchestra. The woman is so moved by the new music that she jumps into a man's bassoon. With a definite surrealist edge, *La Toccata* is a critical view of relationships. The men are insensitive and immobile. The woman is always on the move, from one old song to another. She has no centre or stability. Throughout Cournoyer's films women are trapped, if not physically than mentally.

Then came her lobster phase. "I was painting a lot of lobsters. I had dreams of lobsters. I even painted myself in a bathing suit with a lobster." *Old Orchard Beach, PQ* (1982) deals with, yes, lobsters. Once again, Cournoyer used a photo-collage technique. The film is entirely set at Orchard Beach. The first half is akin to an Eadweard Muybridge experiment. We see bodies in motion, all shapes and sizes. The film then focuses on a man glaring hungrily at a woman's backside. Suddenly the beach becomes a playground for the lecherous. The women transform into canned sardines. The lifeguard, the icon of safety, turns into a lobster as he makes love to the woman. Cournoyer creates an ugly, self-destructive environment. The woman embraces the lobster and clearly enjoys the bestial moment. Women are active participants in their own oppression. The woman is self-destructive, seemingly desperate for companionship.

Frustrated by the technical complications of *Old Orchard Beach, PQ*, Cournoyer turned to rotoscope animation for her next film, *Dolorosa* (1988). A woman examines herself in the mirror. She sees flabby skin. She is aging. Yet inside she feels as young as ever.



Le Chapeau

# UNDERNEATH *LE CHAPEAU* OF MICHÈLE COURNOYER



Une Artiste

applied for the NFB's *Cinéastes recherché* program in 1989. Being in her 40s, and having made a number of films, she doubted whether she would be eligible; however, producer Yves Leduc (*La Boite, Juke-Bar*) determined that she was indeed eligible. (The aim of the program was to allow filmmakers to make animated films under professional conditions, something new for Cournoyer.) She submitted *La Basse cour* (*A Feather Tale*), a scenario about an addictive relationship, and won the competition.

Apart from *Le Chapeau*, *La Basse cour* (1992) is Cournoyer's strongest film. It opens with the shot of a cracking egg forming a face with tears. Something has been broken. A sleeping woman receives a call from her lover. He wants her to a dead over. She obeys and arrives in a take-out delivery box as a chicken. The man holds her, rocks her, pulls her feathers off and begins to eat her. Initially, the woman allows herself to play this role, but she realizes she must take control of the situation before she completely loses herself. The final shot of the film shows the woman waking up, the man snoring beside her, and feathers on the ground. The addiction is over.

With the success of *La Basse cour*, Cournoyer was hired full time by the Board. Her first "official" NFB project was an entry for the series *Droits au coeur* (*The Rights from the Heart*). She chose the topic of freedom to discover talent. Cournoyer worked on a computer for the first time, using a combination of live action, photography and drawings. *Une Artiste* (1994) is about a young girl who turns her domestic space into a creative environment, upsetting her father. It provides a clear example of the naiveté of *The Rights from the Heart* series. The father goes from uninterested to supportive for no apparent reason. Cournoyer had initially proposed that the father be an alcoholic, but this was felt to be too strong. It seemed that reality had no place in the series.

*Le Chapeau* (2000) was initially made for *The Rights from the Heart*. This time Cournoyer chose to depict sexual abuse. She initially set out to make the film by using photo montage and a computer. She made a precise storyboard and created some images on the computer. However, she soon realized that this technique was not working. "I took some photos of an actor in the stairs, in a bar, and I tried to do some reproductions of the photos. But it was too precise and doing the inbetweens was a nightmare. There were some beautiful parts, but something was not working and I was feeling extremely sick." Cournoyer became so sick that she was

unable to work for three months. She was dizzy, emotionally strung out and she reached the point where she couldn't even go out doors.

The sickness, however, proved inspiring. Cournoyer began to draw black ink on paper at home. Pierre Hébert became the new head of the French unit and he told Cournoyer to start again. "She was going nowhere," says Hébert, "and in my judgement her original approach was a dead end. She showed me the first crude drawings that she had been doing when she was researching the film, and I thought they were very powerful. I thought she should restart from that point." He then insisted Cournoyer remove the computer and all photographic references from her office. "He removed all my crutches. I had been working for two years. It was like a divorce. I had to start again." Hébert's suggestions proved liberating, albeit addictive in their own way. "It was like a religion. It was in my mind all the time. I was raping my brushes and staining my drawings. It became more and more liberating. I worked in a primitive, direct communication with my devils and found the story in the execution."

*La Basse cour* (*A Feather Tale*)



*Le Chapeau* is one of the most important films to emerge from the NFB in a long time. It was done without compromise. Superbly edited by Fernand Bélanger and Jean Derome, there is no cut in the film, only metamorphoses; an ambivalent endless rape. Memories, objects and characters mingle and merge neglecting their temporal and spatial boundaries accompanied by Derome's powerful musical score. Past and present fuse, and we are implicated in the acts of abuse. Like Dante, but guideless, we experience a hell our minds cannot imagine.

"It never happened." "It's all in your imagination." "You're over exaggerating." These are responses to people who have been abused emotionally, physically or sexually bullied by those they trust. What is most disturbing about *Le Chapeau* is not the graphics. It is the memories and images that loom underneath our hats. We unwaveringly define ourselves through what we can see. What we do not see, we doubt. *Le Chapeau*, like all of Michèle Cournoyer's films, takes us to places we do not want to see, to a darkness that lurks behind our scared small-talk smiles. In this darkness we stumble.

TAKE ONE