

Notes on some Canadian films - Hot Docs and Montreal, 2015

Films seen at Hot Docs, in order of vision :

ARAYA, Margot Benacerraf, 1959, 82 min. Venezuela, France
THE CREATION OF MEANING, Simone Rapisarda Casanova, Canada-Italy, 90'
CHAMELEON, Ryan Mullins, Canada, 78'
HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD, Jerry Rothwell, UK-Canada, 112'
THE DICTATOR'S HOTEL, Florian Hoffmann, Germany-CAR, 16'
ELEPHANT'S DREAM, Kristof Bilsen, Belgium-UK, 74'
THE CONVERSATION, Anastasia Novikova, Russia, 21'
STRANGE PARTICLES, Denis Klebleev, Russia, 52'
FRACTURED LAND, Damien Gillis, Fiona Rayher, Canada, 78'
FINDING MACPHERSON, Serge Giguère, Canada, 77'
ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD, Suzanne Crocker, Canada, 87'
HAIDA GWAI, ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD, Charles Wilkinson, Canada, 75'

and two films seen in Montreal

LA PASSION D'AUGUSTINE, Léa Pool, Canada,
L'EMPREINTE, Carole Poliquin, Canada,

Having seen a certain number of Canadian films thanks to this year's trip to Hot Docs in Toronto and a day at the Beaubien Cinema in Montreal, I'll try to tie up a certain number of themes to give an impression on what I found new in terms of style, voice and theme.

Content in the English language Canadian films was marked by a strong interest in environmental issues, and in particular the value conflicts internal to the extraction industries, a theme obviously reinforced by my own selection process. "Fractured Land", from this point of view my favourite, talked about the struggle between an indigenous group of Dene natives and the expanding fracking industry in BC. Central to the film is a young Dene lawyer and activist named Caheb Behn, who perceptively describes the "fractures" as also running through the Dene people themselves, those who are for preserving the land and traditional values, and those attracted by the jobs and money offered by the industry. The film relies heavily on Behn as a person. We follow him for some three or four years during his life as student, spokesperson, private individual. He makes an interesting subject, intelligent and introspective enough to be able to talk about his own growth processes and contradictions. His expression of unease at his own weakness facing the temptations of easy relationships with women that came with greater celebrity was perhaps the most touching on that score. But also we follow his frustration as he attempts to bring forward a motion against fracking at the Canadian Congress of Indigenous Peoples, only to find it stuck on the back burner because of his lack of familiarity with procedure. And his self-doubts, at the moment when he might have participated in some violent protest against land loss in New Brunswick, only to be halted by the thought that being arrested could put in jeopardy his entire project of becoming a lawyer to support the cause of his people. The film leaves no ambiguity as to the side of the issues that the filmmakers are defending, pro-environment, pro-traditional native and highly critical of the industry and its provincial governmental allies, we are on board 100%. Their sincerity and steady commitment are impressive, the film is honest. Where that leaves the movement and what difference its screenings will be able to make are open questions, but it's a strong contribution.

"Haida Gwaii, On the Edge of the World", offers a portrait of a community of people, natives and non-natives, who are trying to make a go of a different type of sustainable and solidarity based economy on the island. The film could have made more of an exploration into the contradictions of

working with an industry - in this case logging - which necessarily is under the same pressures to produce as other actors out there. This is capitalism, kid, even if you're structured as a cooperative. This message is subliminally communicated in the one shot we have of the native logging company installation - big truck, load of logs, machinery and people, looking like any other company extraction site. Instead of thought and analysis, Charles Wilkinson, the Hot Docs Grand Prize winning film-maker, prefers neat drone-piloted aerial shots of what is undoubtedly a beautiful place. The film is topped off with a manipulative music-video feel good ending. The totem pole goes up and I was left feeling cold and put off. The Hot Docs selection team made much of the film's going beyond protest and moving into building alternatives. Except that we don't learn much about how these alternatives function, what their problems are, and how difficulties are resolved. They're presented as being "there" with various island inhabitants showing up at interview sessions to talk about them. We're happy all these people look so happy but frustrated that we don't learn a bit more. Stylistically, the film is not far from being a promotion video alternating between set pieces of prepared action and set pieces of interview. There's not much life and spontaneity and no footage showing how these people actually function together.

Then there was the "grand-dad, tell us how it was" film about the founders of Greenpeace, "How to Change the World", a thoughtful, effective work about the events and personalities active at the very birth of modern environmental consciousness. The researchers and director did a fine job of exploiting the period's archives and segmenting the subject into a certain number of chapters with titles summarising the "lessons" that would eventually seep into much of the modern civil society protest movement - let the action be the message, make full use of media, and more controversially, let go of power, etc. It was also an interesting look at a set of individuals and individual trajectories - the advantage of seeing things over time - attracted together at one moment to create an organisational dynamic in one context, only to spin off in different, sometimes contradictory, directions afterwards as the context shifts. Organisations are born and die, just like human beings, and a federation of energies such as gave birth to the early Greenpeace is fragile, ephemeral and transitional. The film reminds us that it's not a tragedy.

In spite of its ostensibly radical message favouring people's activism and the modern day tools for radical action that Greenpeace pioneered, this is a well crafted but essentially conservative piece of film-making. I found it significant that both this film and "Haida Gwai" used a stylised kind of performance set up for their interview sequences. Charles Wilkinson in "Haida Gwai" put everyone in front of a black curtain with heavy side lighting ; "How to change the world" found a setting with depth and filmed their interviewees as if they were on a studio stage. Just picking up what people have to say from across a desk or sitting on a bed doesn't do it any more. The result is to make the interviews look staged, even if the tone of the voice and what is said comes across as authentic. Interview sequences, one of the hallmarks of documentary, have become artful and artificial and this seems to express an industrial trend, a desire for a "quality" look rather than any personal inventiveness.

Another problem with these films is the ostensible way they carry their pedagogical intent as a kind of badge. This brings with it the disadvantage of positing an alterity between the people who know (the film-makers) and the people to whom their knowledge must be communicated (we, the audience). I have no objection to pedagogical intent, my own film making is entirely based on the idea of its value. And I have no quarrel with the interview as one formal tool to reveal and to bring into contact. But I have doubts when a film seems to be organised to satisfy a pedagogical checklist. I have doubts when the techniques of cinematography are used with the apparent end of stimulating an emotion in favour of the appropriate cause not produced by the situations or interactions being filmed. This I suppose is the objection I would make to "Haida Gwai", and to a lesser extent "How to Change the World". They seem to be "programmed" to be inspiring and uplifting, informative

and moving - all in the right environmental and social directions. No quarrel with the directions. I do have a quarrel with the programme and what comes with it - preformed solutions, a bundling out of information and personal contact in a way designed to maintain interest and variety, but of the type taught in screen-writing classes in film school. First A, then B, then C and then back to A. There's little in the way of spontaneous exploration here, either intellectual or cinematic.

Somewhat refreshing, because void of any interview at all and not ostensibly pedagogical, was the direct cinema approach of "All the Time in the World". Maybe because the camerawoman and director were the same individual as the mum in the family and occasionally on the screen, the film communicated as an experience lived by the film-maker on the same level and in the same way as the people and life she was filming. It uses the crisis in values, the consciousness of ecological disaster, and the way our social organisation is destroying our capacity for social interaction, as a given on which to build its story.

Suzanne Crocker's film presents another difficulty though. It raises questions about risk: the risk one is willing to take for oneself, for others who are close to you, the damage made to a pristine environment by a new kind of invasive intervention on other species and life forms needed in order to take a break from conventional low-risk, wired consumer society. The break is so complete and so radical, the experience of being "connected" comes at such a price, potentially in terms of safety and survival, that we seem to be moving uncomfortably near the limits of common sense, almost to a kind of self-imposed insanity. Does one really need to spend the Yukon winter in a log cabin without water or electricity in order to become connected to another sense of time and to develop more solid relationships with one's family? The break with consumer society is less complete than it seems, by the way. A hell of a lot of money went into all that equipment and supplies, it doesn't look like a venture that would be an option for your local poor migrant. One senses people experiencing a middle class anomie, a kind of mid-life, mid-career, moment of angst that one burst of moneyed consumerism in the rough will cure for the rest of their lives. And in this way, the society - i.e. the group of human beings in which these people are very much integrated - goes unchallenged and unthought in its dynamics and goals. We attack a symptom. And we attack it with a new kind of fully purchased, consumed but dangerous experience. The film is certainly watchable though at the end, I found myself rooting for the bear - I wish those pesky humans would just get the hell out of there. I was certainly a minority in the highly enthusiastic audience. Maybe all of middle class urban Canada is going nuts under its plethora of junk and wiring.

Serge Giguère's film on Martine Chartrand, "Finding Macpherson" opens up to another sort of film-making, in fact two other sorts of film-making. Because Chartrand, an animation artist at the NFB, is the spark which set the whole process in motion resulting in this beautiful, spiral shaped object. Chartrand makes films by painting on glass, a hands-on, highly tactile, physical approach to image making that resonates back to the first representations and smoke stained marks traced on cave walls by our distant ancestors dozens of millenia ago. In fact this sets off a parallel set of warning bells which my partner was particularly sensitive to - doesn't she know that pigments can be poisonous? doesn't she know what happened to Paul Klee? can't she find a pair of gloves? OK, leaving that morbid thread aside, we are facing an almost bicephal method of film direction, because Chartrand plays such an active role in determining who, what and where the shooting is covering that Giguère seems mainly left with the question of how. Fortunately for him, it's the most important question. Because Giguère is making a film about Chartrand, and Chartrand is engaged in an investigation to find out more about the "Macpherson" made famous in a Félix Leclerc song that happened to be an important landmark in her youth, the beginning of her own soul-searching for identity and belonging as an isolated black orphan in an all-white Quebec society. So Chartrand's search is also double - into the past of a paper industry chemist who migrated from Jamaica during the first World War and became friends with the Leclercs, and also into herself - into why this

particular song with its particular reference to a black lumberjack should have marked her so. Giguère follows all these leads patiently, attentively and affectionately, showing us in some detail Chartrand at work in her NFB studio. The film resembles one of those flowers that burst open in Chartrand's films, to be taken up by a hand, apparently crushed but then whirling and circling, transforming scene and time into something else. It's exhilarating and touching to watch, communicating a real sense of freedom and spontaneity, unmistakably the result of many hours of heavy labour in the editing room.

There are some reserves. The encounter with Macpherson's present relatives doesn't tell us much; the camera scrutinises faces looking at old photos and the film's footage searching for signs of emotion. These sometimes appear but don't communicate particularly. The mystery of a man so alone that he died of frostbite in his own house, isolated in a winter storm, is not illuminated by these distant cousins who seem so comfortable amid their togetherness in warm Toronto houses. But that doesn't really matter. That's not the resolution of the search. The resolution of the search is in the searching itself, just as the resolution of Giguère's interest in Chartrand is in Chartrand's creativity itself. It's the drumbeat energy of her speaking, the splashing creativity of her gestures that are important. Not where they come to rest.

The film also functions as an ode to its (co)production company - the NFB. Giguère produces his own work through his independent company "Rapide Blanc". But Chartrand exists because of the NFB. Physically present, with cameo walkby on the parking lot by Alanis Obomsawin, the house in West Montreal - which appears to be nothing more imposing than a standard 1960s high school - is a production space that allows films of limited commercial appeal but enormous artistic value like Chartrand's animated shorts to exist. I guess we could say Canadians should be proud of an institution strong enough to have survived, even in reduced form, several decades of budget cutting by artistically autistic governments. And maybe that also is a political statement about Canada and for Canadians, as much as the anti-extractivist, pro-indigenous rights statements of other films. Canada exists because there is a Canadian state, a state that redistributes and intervenes actively in our society. One of the positive effects of this, oft criticised, interventionism is films like this and artists like Chartrand and Giguère. The film's existence is one political statement, and its exploratory style is another. Flag bearers for a space free from the tyranny of despots, be they the forces of finance, marketers or political monomaniacs.

I'll not say much about the other films seen at the festival. The worst of the bunch was undoubtedly "Chameleon" by Ryan Mullins, curiously given a prize as best "emerging" film-maker. The film covers the dubious exploits of an "investigative reporter" in Ghana who goes about revealing and arresting, with the help of his buddies in the police force, various minor league exploiters of desperate women and lost children. All of this to provide hot copy for a weekly scandal busting newsmagazine that probably sells well due to a savvy mix of sex and sensation. We don't learn much about the economics of all this. Touted as a major and rare example of investigative journalism fighting abuse and corruption in African, one wonders what happened to examples of corruption among politicians, businessmen, police and the justice system. Where are the powerful? Mullins tries to navigate his direction in part by embedding himself in the investigative journalist's team, in part doggedly recording a performance by the journalist before a bevy of star-struck school kids, in part listening to a sole dissenting voice, a spokesperson of the country's association of journalists. As an example of cinematic style, it's a bit thin. The "action" bits are lucky enough to get accompanied by some hard-hitting crime-film synthesiser music, ratcheting up the tension to the point where you just can't wait for the sequence to be over. The manipulative techniques are cheap. The analysis and reflection is limited. Moral quandaries are all over the place and the director barely touches the surface of what's going on. One could say that if the film-maker hadn't been star struck by and fatally identified with his subject, the film wouldn't have got made. One might answer that it wouldn't have been a very big loss.

Arriving in Montreal, we were just in time to see the last projection of "L'Empreinte" by Yves Dubuc and Carole Poliquin at the Beaubien Cinema. There's not a lot on the internet about the film; three reviews, favourable, from La Presse, Voir and Le Devoir, the trailer and that's it. Doesn't seem to be much in the English language press. And I'm not really sure how to handle it. On one level it's just a series of interviews conducted by an on-screen alter ego for the directors whose name is Roy Dupuis, apparently a well known local actor. At least the plethora of "reaction shots" suggest he's a well known local actor, whose mass of facial hair (he doesn't shave regularly) bears exceedingly close and repeated scrutiny. Each interview is "set up" of course with shots dominated by landscapes, waterscapes and elegantly fluid tracking shots of the ambient surroundings. The film is beautiful to watch in many parts and the slightly syrupy musical accompaniment is clearly meant to seduce.

Where all this becomes problematic is in the role it assigns to cinema both as an art and as a forum for intellectual inquiry. The thesis of the film, its *raison d'être*, is the idea that there was a close intermingling of Aboriginal and French societies at the beginning of New France, a kind of social fusion that is supposed to have lasted for about 150 years to the time of the defeat at the hands of the British and the establishment of a much more rigorist church based society of resistance, a society which successfully suppressed the memories of its freer, more mixed beginnings. The notion is that contemporary Quebec culture with its instinctive egalitarianism, its circularity, desire for consensus and inclusion are all unconscious descendants of this original intercourse. One suspects that a portrait of early French settlements would have provided strongly contrasting views and practices on this question. In its method though, the film-makers adopt the thesis as a given and as a truth. All the film needs to do is to string along testimonial after testimonial, interview after interview, all supporting the founding idea. There is no debate as such and no contradictors. Yet the idea itself could perhaps use some questioning.

In what way was the alliance between French "coureurs des bois" with the natives and English long-range fur-trappers with other natives different? What was the difference between the military alliance of the French with the Algonquins and the English alliance with the Iroquois? Why should they produce different results? How did anti-native prejudice and racism in French Canada differ fundamentally from anti-native prejudice and racism in English Canada? The absence of these or other questions and questioners of the film's thesis is disturbing for someone who has no objection to having trenchant theses posited but who also thinks that seeing how they stand up to criticism is an important part of judging their validity. But testing the "validity" of its thesis is not the subject of the film, nor its purpose. One could say that the film is not about its fundamental idea, it's an illustration of it, at the limit a kind of long promotion.

And this brings us to the form and to the problem of artistic representation and organisation. Carole Poliquin and Yves Dubuc in their interviews to the press, make much of the film functioning as a kind of psychoanalysis, bringing forth suppressed memories, allowing people to rediscover unmade associations or connections and overcome past repression. This would perhaps cohere with the strong presence of water and sky in the film's cinematography and the dream-like quality of its lush music. It also perhaps explains the strong emotional reaction the film has produced, especially among people strongly connected to indigenous communities, who find their contributions newly emphasised, recognised and revalued. This doesn't make the thesis any more or less "true". But then the function of a psychoanalysis is not necessarily to uncover any "truth". It's more about the production of a discourse, a discourse which ideally will allow the patient to live with whatever neurosis or obsession is troubling him, or disturbing his relationship to society at large, and permit him to handle it, talk about it, move on and overcome the blocks that they cause. Allowing Quebec society to overcome its historic distrust of and derogatory prejudice against native communities is certainly the social "block" the film's authors are seeking to overcome. They are also calling for the question of "identity" to be made more inclusive, to include in fact the 10,000 or more years of the

continent's human inhabitation. In this sense, the historical value of their discourse matters less than its psychological value. What matters is whether it functions and whether it allows contemporary Quebec to build a more healthy, inclusive conception of itself and reconsider its own, finally admitted and recognised, native heritage. One would imagine this was particularly the case for the native peoples themselves, who are demanding recognition of their contribution, redress for past injuries, and a rebalancing of national focus allowing them to feel included.

The film is politically important, then. Because it also suggests that a part of the Quebec left is not ready to follow Mr Péladeau, the PQ's current pied piper, in his quest for an independent state run by the francophone elite for the francophone elite. Other alternatives, including fruitful alliances with indigenous movements, may perhaps be possible. It's unfortunate that there will not be much discussion or debate about the questions it raises in the rest of the country. It would have been interesting to have a Q and A session at Hot Docs. But apparently the film, which was screened at the earlier Montreal Documentary festival in November, did not interest the selection team, or was not submitted, I don't know. In either case, a pity.

And finally Léa Pool's "Passion d'Augustine" about which I just wish to say that I have rarely seen a film combine so convincingly and fruitfully a love for music with a lovingly faithful reconstitution of a historical moment (the fifties and sixties in a Quebec convent run boarding school for girls specialised in music during the Quiet Revolution), and a love for the art of teaching, and the bond between teacher and student. It's a fiction feature, so outside the bounds of what is being discussed here, but within its traditional structure and artful execution an exceedingly beautiful film.

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