

Denis
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Note-
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PANORAMA
CINÉMA —

LE PANOPTIQUE 1
DENIS CÔTÉ : CRITICAL NOTEBOOK 1999-2005

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Conseil des arts Canada Council
du Canada for the Arts



CONSEIL
DES ARTS
DE MONTRÉAL

ISSN 1923-5925 *Panorama-cinéma* (Imprimé)
ISBN 978-2-9812677-3-3

NOTE

These articles, selected amongst the most engaging and lucid signed by DENIS CÔTÉ, were written between 1999 and 2005, while he was a film critic for the free weekly magazine *ICI*, published in Montreal between 1997 and 2009. With a single exception: *Being a Nobody*, written for *Séquences* magazine's issue #226 (July/August 2003).

Our sincerest thanks go to DOMINIQUE DUGAS (*Éléphant : mémoire du cinéma québécois*) and JASON BÉLIVEAU (*Séquences*) for their support and generosity, and to DENIS CÔTÉ, for his trust, but also for the inspiration sparked by a writing stance that prevents enfeeblement.

PREFACE

Whether you're a critic or a filmmaker, it's all the same

Pasolini – our dear Pasolini! – ended his short film *The Earth as Seen from the Moon* with a moral written in red letters on a green background: “Whether you are alive or dead, it’s all the same”! This strange conclusion comes right after the inexplicable reappearance of Silvana Mangano’s dumb and deaf character in the two protagonists’ house, sometime after slipping on a banana peel and falling from the heights of the Roman Coliseum... This is all very absurd, of course. These twists are part of the burlesque episode created by Pasolini for the anthology film *The Witches*, produced by the ineffable Dino de Laurentiis in 1967.

Pasolini’s moral only makes sense in the singular and inconsequential world of the film. It would seem quite enigmatic from any other angle. I like to quote it out of context, nonetheless, usually to throw off my interlocutors. Because this strange assertion needs to be reflected upon... Curious layers of significance then become apparent, tied into metaphysics, to Pasolini’s Christian heritage, to science... In short, such a paradoxical assertion is far from insignificant and it burrows far deeper than the comic context of its origins.

This detour through Pasolini will seem convoluted given the purpose of this text, which precedes a short anthology of articles by filmmaker Denis Côté, at a time when he had only ambition and a handful of low-budget short films to his credit. Côté was then known/read/feared/loathed/esteemed/followed (I'll let you pick the adequate verb amongst this selection) as a film critic. Between 1999 and 2005, he writes almost 1000 texts, most of them short (he doesn't linger) and all straight to the point, both in tone and style.

(Shamelessly) paraphrasing Pasolini, I've often claimed, as a taunt, that writing a review and directing a film is the same thing. I've said this to friends, to students, to journalists... I don't remember anybody saying, without hesitation, that I was right. Almost everyone disagrees with that statement. And yet...

Yet, I hold the intimate conviction that, beyond a distinction of means, both activities are meant to express a certain vision of cinema. If cinema is nothing more to you than a form of entertainment, it will show just as much in your film as in your review. On the other hand, if you support a higher conception of cinema, both your film or your review will reflect it equally.

That's how it goes with Denis Côté, whose texts embody the passion and gravity necessary to foster a certain vision of cinema's singularity. Take, for example, his utmost joy when discussing Bresson, whose adamancy, rigor and perfectionism he celebrates. Of Bresson, Côté values the resort to de-dramatization, the ability to reject theatrical conventions, and his work with actors that therein become models... Nothing new, you might say; these are usually the things people admire in Bresson. It remains that the choice of Bresson is significant in itself! And when the critic in question adds Béla Tarr to his Pantheon, we understand that his conception of cinema is ingrained in the authors' resistance to industrial and commercial processes. Because Béla Tarr is at once the Boogeyman of distributors and the Messiah for a particular circle of cinephiles.

Talking about fearful distributors, let's talk about those few texts in which Côté joyfully dismantles the commercial machine: in one corner, greedy producers and distributors, mediocre filmmakers and complacent columnists, in the other, the critic, alone with his chocolate croissant*, who's told that he is "barred for life" from press screenings. At the heart of the matter is the way this critic received Nouvelle-France. Moral of the story: criticizing films is no problem, as long as one doesn't bite the hand that feeds nearly everyone in the industry. But the real question is: "who is paying for the chocolate croissant?"

* *I still can't picture Denis Côté with a chocolate croissant.*

The chocolate croissant is a product of the system! And the system we keep quiet about. Is that clear? The system would like to impose even more restrictions on what we can and can't do. Côté dares to point this out in a pair of texts entitled "Damn critics!", texts in which he reminds us of some controversies, in France, caused by Luc Besson and Patrice Leconte's position statements about the critics' responsibility for everything wrong in their lives (I'm exaggerating here and crudely summarizing, but I have no intention of writing three paragraphs about it).

All the same, today, while Denis Côté has directed fifteen feature films, the system still seems to have as many problems with him. Among other filmmakers he supported as a critic, we can include Bruno Dumont, Claire Denis, Catherine Martin and Takashi Miike (with Pasolini as a witness). Singularity, singularity, singularity again and always. It seems the man hasn't changed much since then.

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ExCentrissimo!

They're finally ready to take on the city's discerning cinephiles; the three screening rooms of the new ExCentris complex are freshening up for the venue's grand opening, which could change the face of cinema in Montreal.

Montreal was just bestowed a great gift. Daniel Langlois, true technological Robin Hood and prosperous founder of Softimage, flaunts a big smile since his new baby, the ExCentris, sits at the intersection of St-Laurent and Milton. Although the opening isn't until June 1st, Langlois remains excited and confident in his ability to provide the public with a world-class, cutting-edge complex. Such rightful contentment was palpable during the press visit organized last Tuesday. Truly stunning are these luxury rooms. And so it is a feverish Daniel Langlois who started listing all the technological devices therein to a privileged few whose eyes were overwhelmed. Maximum comfort to humble any megaplex, detachable floors, seats and walls to create multi-purpose rooms, screens with such high definition as to crush all competitors, ventilation under the seats, a cinema-garden, a café, you name it. The whole package. On top of that, the box office will probably spook more than one patron with its weird blue screen system. A strong smell of truly impressive high-tech gadgets embalms this futuristic backdrop with minimalistic undertones. ExCentris is truly the heavenly venue lacking from the city's meager art-house circuit. You may argue that I'm too focused on decor and appearances. And you'd be right.

EXCENTRIS VS CINEMA

The reason for my excitement is quite simple. It's just that the old staff from Parallèle cinema will be in charge of a program that sounds absolutely exquisite. Three shipshape rooms to host true cinema. At last. And at the helm is the extravagant (or annoying, depending on who you ask, but it's part of the character) Claude Chamberlan who, as the great prince of cinephiles, will keep on gathering those little gems that made cinema Parallèle so special and will now enrich the ExCentris. We can certainly trust the man given his extensive prior record. All in all, we have theoretically the perfect mix of style and substance here. A highly commendable debut. All we have to do now is keep an eye on such a promising program. But what drove Daniel Langlois to sink 35 millions of his own money in this project exactly? Apparently, it's the destruction of the defiant and once renowned Élysée cinema, necessary to make way for Softimage's offices, which sparked his desire to give back Montrealers a high temple to the seventh art. Langlois, being quite the visionary, is perfectly conscious that he'll never see his 35 millions again (he's probably got many more...). At the most, he hopes for the place to be autonomous within the next three years. This is truly a patron's gift and we'd be foolish to gripe about it. From June 2nd to 6th, to celebrate its inauguration, coinciding as if by chance with the Magnifico Festival, ExCentris presents a free selection of excellent films. Go for it.

— *Mom, I'm taking you out to ExCentris tonight.*

— *What's that?*

— *Put on your boots on, mom, I'm taking you to the movies, real ones. You'll see, it can get quite scary out there.*

Ring : The Quietude of Terror

REVIEW OF RINGU (HIDEO NAKATA)

Fantasia's team has the key to the best-kept secret in the West. For now, the frenzy caused by *The Ring*, this terrifying Japanese film, has left its indelible mark only at Brussels' International Fantastic Film Festival in Belgium, making sure to capture the Grand Prize in its midst. Montreal is now ready to host this absolute gem of terror during two memorable screenings at Cinéma Impérial.

A huge happening across Asia (not to say a genuine social phenomenon), *Ring* has many exploits to its credit. Sold to Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and the Philippines, the film has smashed every box office record in Japan with 1,5 million spectators so far. Home video sales have reached a delightful 750,000 copies. The frenzy quickly reached Hong Kong, who saw *Ring* overtake Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. That says it all. Asia isn't immune to the trappings of sequels either. Hence the same smashing success enjoyed by *Ring 2* (also screening at Fantasia) and the impending assault of *Ring 3*. The hype is such that even a false sequel, *Rasen*, managed to insure a small share of the Japanese horror market, a true sacred ground in the land of the rising sun. The Koreans have also tried their hand at the mill by offering a "personalized" version, subtly entitled *The Ring Virus* (screening at Fantasia as well). *Ring* parapherna-

lia, adorned with the diabolical little Sadako (the Asian equivalent to our Freddy Krueger) has also become a lucrative religion for the creators of this film, inspired by Suzuki Koji's bestseller, which sold 2.5 million copies. At this very moment, five American companies are rumoured to be negotiating the rights to the book in order to extract a "Western" film version. Can't wait to assess the damage!

THE MALEFICENT TAPE

You are probably wondering to what the film owes its success. It's quite simple really: a well-knit tale of horror, precise mise-en-scene and a singularly smart treatment that refuses to take the spectator for an idiot. Genre cinema requires no more, yet rarely manages to gather all three. Here's *Ring* in a nutshell. Rumours are spreading, especially amongst students. There's an evil videotape going around; once it is seen, an irreversible cycle begins: the viewer then receives a phone call announcing his death at the exact same time the following week. The legend turns out to be true and the bodies of several kids are found. Journalist Reiko, sensing a scoop, starts investigating. Flanked by her ex-husband, she discovers the origins of some hazy events involving a demonical tale of incest and spiritism. Almost 40 years later, the spirit of the young and ghastly Sadako is made manifest through this videotape from beyond the grave.

THE HORROR WITHIN

Resumed as such, the film's storyline might seem mundane. That's without taking into account its excellent mise-en-scène, which transcends the horror genre and enriches it with symbols imbedded deep within Japanese culture. The Western eye quickly grasps *Ring*'s sobriety and its lack of pretention. Accustomed to the childish products from our Southern neighbours, the special care dedicated to the film becomes obvious in its screenplay and in the gaze of director Hideo Nakata (a young master of psychological horror, discovered through *Joyû-rei*, unreleased here).

Ring works without lofty effects, but finds subtle means to permeate our imagination with chilling touches. The crucial moment where images from the accursed tape are revealed

heightens our interest as Nakata perfectly plays the “object as revelatory medium” card. Whether it is the dire perspective of a ringing phone, the precise framings constantly hinting at potential danger zones, or, most of all, the television itself, which, as a symbol and a means of entertainment, therein becomes a source of extreme terror for our subconscious, even when turned off. Everything unfolds at a slow pace, through skilful, unflashy editing, a fixed camera and a nearly bare music track: it is the exact opposite of the traditional, traditionally American horror film. But what makes *Ring* so typically Japanese?

KIDS LOVE IT?

Joined in Japan, the film’s sales representative, Kayo Yoshida, is surprised to hear me say that *Ring* is truly terrifying. “In Japan, the film belongs to a certain tradition and its success does not specifically stem from its ability to scare the audience. At a very young age, children leave for the summer holidays, lodging with other family members, and it is customary for parents, uncles or grandparents to tell them horror stories. It’s often the same story: one or more souls that are unhappy in Heaven come back to Earth to talk and appear to children. *Ring* is based on such tales, and therefore, it is not necessarily terrifying since youngsters here have learned to deal with death in a more significant way than Westerners. And so the film’s target audience is made of high school students, 14-15 year olds who enjoy screaming during the film. Word of mouth functioned on its own and people came to have fun screaming during the screenings. I wouldn’t say that the film works because people are scared.”

I’m left alone then, with the primal fear that this film instilled in me, unable to grasp the random “excitement” or “pleasure” that the Japanese feel at the sight of Sadako, the Eastern Freddy! Mrs. Yoshida aptly summarizes: “our people have made a fun habit of being scared.” The Fantasian audience will now judge the quality of *The Ring* during its two sole screenings at Cinéma Impérial, on the 26th of July and the 13th of August. Scurry over, and prepare to be scared!

Claire and Denis' Beaux Travaux

INTERVIEW WITH DENIS LAVANT ABOUT BEAU TRAVAIL (CLAIRE DENIS)

Claire Denis adapts Melville and signs an exceptional film haunted by the sweat of battered male bodies, abandoned within the depths of Africa. Central to her precisely choreographed, absurdist poetry is the presence of mythical comedian Denis Lavant, who graciously accepted to comment on an equally demanding and unforgettable shoot.

Beau Travail is a true treat for the knowledgeable cinephile. Claire Denis (*Nénette et Bonie*, *Chocolat*) took a shine to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, but she decided to drop the nautical background and replace the sailors with legionaries stationed in Djibouti. The chores are backbreaking, the power structure is rigid, the attraction felt for some is always lesser than the antipathy felt for others. Amongst them is Galoup (impeccable Denis Lavant, who retrospectively narrates the story), a heinous Chief Warrant Officer who lets out his power surplus on poor recruit Sentain (Grégoire Colin). Then, there is Forestier (Michel Subor), a withdrawn Commandant. And the burning sun... To indulge in comparison, let us invoke the work of Depardon and Malick.

“Inapt for life, inapt for society”, as Galoup says, the men framed by the filmmaker rise up like fallen gods reaching for a hypnotic horizon. Britten's operatic fantasies and Agnès Godard's lustrous images do the rest. In short: a unique brand of poetry, joyously fractured to evoke the labyrinthine selective

memory of the grim Galoup. *Beau travail* is a masterful film, in a constant state of weightlessness, climaxing with one of the most powerful long takes in recent memory.

We joined Denis Lavant in Paris. A most pleasant man, he vividly remembers his trip to Djibouti.

What does *Beau travail* mean for you?

We finished shooting in Djibouti about a year ago. I saw the film only once, in Venice, several months ago; it gave me a funny feeling, I need to see it again. I recall that strange rhythm, which threw me aback. The drama unfolds and we feel caught in a spider web. It's great when a film triggers an impression in the viewer that can last for days. I'd never been to Africa; it left a lasting impression on me. And so did working with Claire Denis and her particularly delicate way of leading. This has been a very enriching experience for me.

As the story goes, the screenplay was very minimalistic and Claire Denis had trouble getting permission to shoot...

Yes, there was a screenplay, primarily an intimate rendition of Melville's *Billy Budd*. She transposed the sailors' story into an even more macho universe, that of the Foreign Legion in the desert of Djibouti. Then, it became a day-by-day operation, which stemmed from Claire's total confidence in the work of cinematographer Agnès Godard. The basis remained Melville's work, but we felt comfortable taking liberties with it. Yes, there were some major problems working with the Legion. From the get-go, rumors went around to the effect that the film was meant to discredit the Legion. Word from the top became clear: no contact with the shooting team, no collaboration. We also know that, during the night, "strangers" came to destroy our sets. We worked completely outside of the Legion's jurisdiction.

You play Galoup, an authoritative man struggling with a strange jealousy. What similarities can we draw with Melville's narrator character?

I would say that Galoup is a bit more extroverted and expressive in the film. He is plagued by desire, indeed, and sharply experiences the weight of things. In the voice-over, he volunteers a lot of emotions. The book is more descriptive when it comes

to situations. There are no dialogues; it's more of an account. Galoup harbors an unseemly side of course, but he possesses a great humanity and he fights to follow up on his impulses. What fascinates and troubles me in the world of legionaries is this compulsive allegiance, this blind obedience toward officers, power structures: the product a brainwashing army independent from the army itself!

And all this unwarranted hatred toward recruit Sentain...

It hardly makes sense indeed. According to Melville, this recruit represents new blood in the eyes of Galoup, he embodies something beautiful, heroic. Sentain inspires sympathy and confronts Galoup with a crippling angst stemming from his potentially shaky position within the Legion. Whether it is amongst Melville's sailors or legionaries, proximity is both rich and suspicious. Everything transpires, nothing is definite, there's a latent sexuality that *Beau travail* perfectly captures and shoots.

What's this Beau travail in reference to?

It's Rimbaud. Arthur Rimbaud went to Ethiopia and to Djibouti at some point, where he smuggled weapons for King Ménélik. After that, in his letters, he alludes cynically to this period by mentioning his "good work" over there.

And the atmosphere during the shoot, working with a bunch of men led by two women? You also worked with a choreographer...

Yes, with all the stylized elements in the film, I think Claire and Agnès perceptive work was perfectly befitting. They shared a complicity that allowed them to delve deep into the human material at play and into the landscapes as well. Within the team, there were mostly dancers from choreographer Bernardo Montet's troupe. We were given an intensive training for three weeks: gymnastics, dancing, combat simulation, push-ups... A fun mix that provides the film with some intensity and physical tonicity. Aside from the actors and dancers, there was Jean-Yves Vivet, who participated both as an actor and a technical advisor as he'd been part of the Legion. A real legionary, shaved head and very different from us all. There were some tensions within

the group: everyone had a strong personality; we came close to fighting sometimes. I remember trying to put some order into this.

When we look at Denis Lavant's track record, it feels like we're in the presence of a rare, mythical actor. How do you choose your roles? Are you bothered by the 'Caraxian hero' label?

The bulk of my work is theatrical. I'm more present on the theatre scene and I don't necessarily need to play film roles. I collaborate mainly with authors whose personality inspires me. I am not prejudiced; it all depends on the initial contact. If the film narrative I'm offered isn't anything special, I stay in the theater. Recently, I shot *Tuvalu*, a silent German film, for a young man, Veit Helmer. That said, I don't really know how people perceive me in France. I think my work is more renowned elsewhere. In the world of cinema, I'm considered a marginal, Leos Carax's alter ego. But I don't mind at all; it's nothing to be ashamed of.

Bresson or The Wind Swept Where It Would

ROBERT BRESSON RETROSPECTIVE

It is when given a chance to discuss his favourite filmmakers that the film critic is truly happy.

Right at the beginning of the impeccable *Pickpocket* (1959), the 'hero' Michel uses a monotone voice to ask the detective accusing him of several larcenies: "Can't we admit that able men, intelligent and talented, geniuses even – and thus essential to society – instead of vegetating all their lives, can, sometimes, be free to disobey the law"? We instantly think of Robert Bresson, lonesome rebel, the instigator of austere precepts staunchly upheld during a whole century that ended with him (1901-1999).

Following his career as a painter, Bresson directs his first film, *Angels of Sin*, written by Jean Giraudoux, in 1943. With *The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne* in 1945, the filmmaker retains the services of Jean Cocteau as screenwriter. The Bresson signature is not fully formed yet; his cinema follows in the footsteps of Renoir's 'theatralized' French production. The free-form *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950) is quite surprising in that regard. Bresson does away with dramatization and literary conventions. The actors' performances are disembodied; the *mise-en-scène* refuses affectation. We would talk of purification. He would prefer to evoke the power of the cinematographer.

DOWN WITH THEATER

Increasingly intransigent, Robert Bresson would never speak of Cinema again, choosing to see it as a lazy tool for mimicking reality, filmed theater, subservient to the whims of stars with whom the spectator would rather identify than learn from. The

release of *A Man Escaped* in 1956 marks a turning point for Bresson, who chooses to show things instead of describing them. Until 1983, a string of massive masterpieces follows, through a painful creative process described pejoratively as dry by his detractors, as pure by others.

In his films, Bresson necessarily references literature; he adapts Tolstoy, but also Dostoyevsky and Bernanos twice. However, he uses it to elevate cinema to the rank of autonomous art, that of sound, images and the associative power of editing. Therefore, he will invert the “psychoanalytical and descriptive” functions of novelistic narration. The Bressonian technique consists of never challenging the eye and ear’s natural perception (he worked all his life with 50mm lenses), using a scarce voice-over as a neutral marker, betraying neither space nor time while brilliantly complementing the numerous ellipses of his precise filmography.

The greatest ambiguity inherent to this rigorous and perfectionist conception of cinema lies in the casting process and the flat tone imposed by Bresson when reciting dialogues (aside from two actresses, none of his non-professionals would pursue a noteworthy career). Lifeless observers of a de-dramatized reality, his protagonists (or models, as he called them) and their bodies allowed Bresson to create an unforgiving vision of a world that he always considered to be tainted. His narratives would track the solemn gestures of the human body, this noble matter impervious to chaos. Striving for the sacralization of gestures, the spirit, destiny, the act of confession, and redemption (topics dear to the author), Bresson could never take into account the demonstrative capabilities of an actor. Whether it is the punch thrown in *Au Hasard Balthazar*, the inexplicable larcenies committed in *Pickpocket*, or the nearly abstract duels of *Lancelot of the Lake*, Bresson frames the idea of an act rather than the act itself, championing an abstract, yet always intelligible worldview.

COMBINING SIGNS

Notwithstanding this theoretical hotchpotch, Bressonian cinema is just as inspiring as it is inspired. Never does the author – who worked rather instinctively despite what the perfection of his work would suggest – lose our interest, always mindful of engaging our gaze... through sound, a discreet yet masterfully integrated element in his work. The man wished for a cinema of the eye and another one for the ear. While rejecting the depth of field and establishing shots, he would rather compose appropriate shots than beautiful ones, refusing to enforce any hierarchical relationship between primary and secondary visual

elements. Bresson then allows us to glimpse at the authentic spirituality and suffering of humans (beings, never appearances), expressed not through images themselves, but through their relationship, thanks to a mysterious combination of signs and of symbols impervious to cheap thrills. In *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974), there's almost no recreation nor spectacle; Bresson exalts the catharsis of combat, the idea behind sword fights that we practically never get to see onscreen.

Could this cinematographic Way of the Cross be best resumed in *Pickpocket's* final cry of love: "Oh, Jeanne, what funny path I had to cross to reach you?" Or in this madly accomplished, absolutely perfect work of art, whose title conjures the false god of the contemporary world: *L'Argent* (1983)? This final brick in the Bressonian wall is indeed one of the greatest films of all time.

The Pharaoh's Sacrifice

ON L'HUMANITÉ (BRUNO DUMONT)

To me, only one film of the 1999 FFM assumed the regal attire of expectations supreme: *L'humanité*. A recent subject of controversy, would Bruno Dumont's sophomore feature surpass the wondrous naturalism of his 1997 debut *La vie de Jésus*? Exhausted at the time, halfway through this annual marathon, I'm confined to one of those screening booths where journalists can get acquainted with the films on offer. And so I saw a very bad VHS copy (a sacrilege) of *L'humanité* in this sorry peep show. It was enough for me to proclaim and pen my disappointment a few hours later: "lengthy tendentious silences and rarely enlightening philosophical tendencies, [...] presumptuous downtime." Since then, I was reacquainted with the wholly justified 148 minutes of *L'humanité* and, by way of confession (and a stop to my own apology), I acknowledge a grave mistake and affirm my great admiration. Undeniable proof that Dumont's film requires active involvement, keen senses and an uncanny respect for the medium.

THE IDIOT

In the film, Dumont presents us with a character-sum, an *idiot* named Pharaon de Winter (Emmanuel Schotté, a non-professional actor so bluffing that his true mental 'capabilities' can never be fathomed), a police lieutenant in the small town of Bailleul in Flandre, where a horrible sex crime has just been committed. Pharaon investigates alongside his Chief. Living with his mother, but mostly meeting with his friends and "lovers of convenience" Joseph and Domino (Philippe Tullier and Séverine Canele, both perfectly lead), this anti-Columbo watches the days go by and beholds the growth of worldly sorrows. Despite his quest to find the guilty party, you've probably figured that *L'humanité* is one of those films where the object of

the quest is always less important than the quest itself.

A martyr of macrocosmic scale, Pharaon bears the weight of the world on his sturdy shoulders. Dumont makes him a modern-day apostle (going so far as to make him levitate and symbolically wear the cuffs of 'universal sin' as a form of Redemption), a being blessed with oversized empathy and an unprecedented propensity for pardon. His blissful candor makes him a huge man-child with the power to marvel at a bike ride or a simple apple in which to bite. By claiming a deputy's authority – one must watch how the few investigators 'slowly rush' to 'play' the cops – Pharaon keeps watch from his existential balustrade, claiming the best seat to watch over the spectacle of worldly agony. And before this tragic landscape where a little girl is murdered, Pharaon's moral convictions are weakened all the more.

Dumont, a former philosophy teacher, likes to confront sex and death in *L'humanité* (Domino constantly volunteers her voluptuous forms to Pharaon's gaze), the embodiment of this struggle being unambiguously located in the two rigorous shots alluding to Courbet's *L'origine du monde*: the first one, tinged with magnificent brutality, where Dumont shoots a young sex, innocent and abused. Then, later, Domino's guilty but lively one. Whether it is sexual or spiritual, the limits of identity for Dumont are akin to that of a prison, an oppressive universe that we can beautify, but which always relies on a personal code, thus rarely being at odds with others. To monthly French magazine *Technikart*, Bruno Dumont confided in October 99: "I nurture a relationship with individuals, not with classes, I tend to run away from the collective. My cinema isn't social at all. It shares some resemblance to it, but addresses only the invisible. And that is hard to capture."

BEAUTY, PERIOD.

L'humanité belongs to this (nearly extinct) race of films where history, no matter how rich it is, remains subservient to the medium. And never does it take precedence over the language that emanates from it. This typically Bressonian conundrum is at the heart of Dumont's work, which, nonetheless, never veers toward formalism. Perhaps we could address its systematic reliance on long takes, rigid framing and extreme minimalism, but *L'humanité* doesn't tolerate stylistic squabbling for long, its end result being so tremendous and its framing, its structure so divine.

The first shot of *L'humanité* tackles the skyline of our certainties outright. A man (Pharaon), faraway, moves with confident but irregular footsteps toward the other extremity of the screen, of space. His presence severs the Sky from the Earth, his trajectory carries over the borders of the flat screen of our certain-

ties. And thus, Bruno Dumont, former director of institutional documentaries, dwells more on questions than their answers in this highly theoretical, but not overly pretentious film mass. *L'humanité* is pure aesthetics. *L'humanité* is pure, *L'humanité* is.

Such an austere proposition is made up mostly of raw cinema, all the equations contained within this vibrantly, but never overly, aesthetic work stem more from the forgotten depths of Bresson's cinematography than the heavy Rousseauian doctrines that the film deceptively flaunts. A hard film? *L'humanité* certainly is. It may seem coarse to those whose eyes are impaired by the expeditious image market of American cinema, or conceited and abstract to fans of the explainable and the readily apparent. For those, let us withhold any warning; for the others, let us guide them toward this unforgettable journey into the hearts of *L'humanité's* fragile psyches.

Projection 101

You paid 10 or 12\$ for a film. Maybe it wasn't to your taste. But how about the projection? Was it worth the admission price?

We tend to forget, but the act of filmgoing, while desacralized today, cannot be resumed to a simple affinity for a story told through a screen, whether flat or curved. There's a primordial element to it, which, with time, has been forgotten through either ignorance or a devil-may-care attitude: the quality of the projection. The projectionist is right there (or the projection attendant, distinction!), working just behind the flashing window. But is he really? And if so, is he qualified? Is he a passionate cinephile? So many considerations to which we pay too little attention and about which there is no proper education.

At 12.50\$ for an evening ticket at the Paramount (slightly less in the neighbouring cinemas), it's important to be aware of such "details," which can ruin or even harshen the screening of the latest Hollywood product or the latest Iranian gem. It happened to me a few months ago, during a press screening. Céline Baril's *Du pic au cœur* was shown in Theater 3 of the Quartier Latin cinema. It was ridiculously dark, almost awkwardly so. The lack of information didn't allow for people to create a riot, but the whole thing bugged me. It wasn't the first time either. But beware! Before blaming the boom operator or the cinematographer of this or that film, it is imperative to make sure that the projectionist did his job right.

A QUESTION OF MINDSET... AND MONEY

Here's a discipline with a complex lexicon with ever-changing technical requirements. For Thierry Lefèvre, at the Ex-Centris, despite the occasionally flawed film (he cites *Sue, Fast Food Fast Women, Signs & Wonders*), things are quite obvious: "During a screening, with the technology available today and a conscientious worker in the cabin, you should never have to worry about overly loud sound or out-of-focus images. That is not normal." Of course, Lefèvre, who has 14 years of experience as a projectionist for dozens of outfits in Quebec and France, works with the best equipment. The Saint-Laurent street cinema has

a well-established reputation. But let's talk about all the others, not those supposedly outdated theaters (Cinéma du Parc, soon to be refurbished), nor those "high end" ones according to Lefèvre (Goethe-Institut, ONF, Cinémathèque), but the mega champions of multiplexes, masters of entertainment, at the so-called 'cutting edge' of technology.

Being the technical director of 20 years at the Cinémathèque québécoise, François Auger unsurprisingly states that the standardization of screening equipment results in more accurate and regular projections across the commercial circuit. However, he warns, as did Lefèvre, that such standardization is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, multiplexes are adequately geared to project big commercial films in the 1:85 or Cinemascope ratio. That goes without saying. On the other hand, they care little about the chance to project movies (often French ones) in the 1:66 ratio or, in the case of older films or films from less fortunate countries, like Iran, the 1:37 ratio. To the layman, and to resume succinctly, let us say that these numbers refer to a celluloid format and the relative dimension of the images onscreen. A boom mic is hanging above a comedian's head? The frame seems a little tight? Two times out of three the mistake comes from the projectionist.

A recent and symptomatic example is Jean Eustache's 1973 *The Mother and the Whore*, a film with mono sound meant to be shown in the 1:37 ratio. Twenty-five years later, a Montreal-based distributor releases a new copy of the film at the Quartier Latin, equipped exclusively for the 1:85 ratio, with sound parameters set automatically for Dolby Stereo! The result: a film shown in a ratio other than that intended by the author, with frames trimmed by a whole foot and distorted sound, if not set manually to mono. Same thing for *A Time for Drunken Horses* (slightly disproportionate subtitles) and many others. But whose fault is that? The multiplexes' and their regrettable tendency to consider such films as "exceptions"? The small distributor's, handicapped by the lack of adequately-equipped venues, having to survive and thus allowing their projection under inadequate conditions?

Talking with Thierry Lefèvre and François Auger, I heard a few telling stories about the mercantile ambitions of theater owners, a majority of which hire only two projectionists working extra-long shifts to cover 15-20 cinemas, employees asked to come in a meagre 45 minutes prior to the first screenings of the day. Preventive maintenance is reduced to the bare minimum, and the potential of errors due to automation or the inattention of technicians (and floor managers) with little experience and, much less breathing room, is potentially increased. "Hard

to keep the sacred flame of the craft and the love of cinema after two years in such conditions,” says Lefèvre, who also deplors the deficient training of Quebecois projectionists, as opposed to their French counterparts.

The dodgiest practice resides in the audacity with which the lamps used for projection are pushed to the maximum of their capacity. Such a lamp, which ensures the adequate luminosity of a film projected onscreen, needs to be changed after approximately 1500-2000 hours of use. Yet, to save a bit of cash, certain places joyfully drag this limit to a frustrating level for the cinephile who, unbeknownst to him, 'enjoys' a film far too dark. But who will go out and compare with another theater? A standard intensity of 16 foot-lamberts is required to obtain optimal results. The acceptable limit is 12; it is troubling then to find out that the lamps' brightness at Quartier Latin oscillated between 7 and 10 foot-lamberts during Thierry Lefèvre's test a few years ago. And where do we show movies to critics and columnists, those responsible for appreciating this or that film? At the Quartier Latin, of course, which rents its theaters in the morning to distributors looking for the cheapest price. Coffee included. Do the math and try to find out the guilty party amongst this chain, where each link tries to profit from cinema and its artisans. Beware.

Mourning May Start

A REVIEW OF I'M GOING HOME (MANOEL DE OLIVEIRA)

Several films competing at Cannes last year centered on the theme of mourning: Moretti's *The Son's Room*, of course, or the sublime *What Time Is It There?* by Tsai Ming-liang. Many others as well. That is why 2001 was dubbed « the year of mourning » on the Croisette. That said, Manoel de Oliveira's *I'm Going Home* was assuredly the most delicate of the lot, one that'd rather whistle a tender requiem than flaunt the true mark of death onscreen. As for those expecting yet another obtuse reflection from the Portuguese patriarch, they were left with no choice but to marvel at the simplicity of his approach. All the young guns out there better have been paying attention!

AN HONEST MAN

Michel Piccoli plays (marvelously of course) the role of Gilbert Valence, an aging yet iconic actor. After a night at the theater to see Ionesco's *Exit the King* (hardly an innocent choice), Valence learns that the Reaper has tragically taken the lives of his wife, his daughter and his son-in-law. Mourning can start. Nothing much happens after that, mourning discretely taking over everything. To resume one's daily routine, to find back one's passion for his work (Valence appears in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, then in Joyce's *Ulysses*, now a shoddy TV movie, hardly innocent choices by Oliveira again), to buy fancy new shoes, to spend time with one's grandson... As a reply to his agent's question, "how do you feel?", Gilbert Valence simply states: "I subsist."

Through devices of sheer audacity, such as the extraordinary and lengthy opening sequence at the theater, halfway between the stage and its back, or this close-up of a shoe used as a countershot during a conversation, Oliveira's signature becomes ob-

vious. His gracious finesse in the art of purification, of getting to the heart of things (sometimes in a single shot) allows for the dramatic emancipation of this beautiful character, at once honest, righteous and upright (in a hilarious scene, the actor refuses to play in a silly action-packed TV series), met with a tragedy that he never deserved.

Behind the film's touching candour lies a new conception of the world for the filmmaker, who witnessed the two World Wars, the transition from monarchy to the republic, a man who remembers tyranny, socialism and the fall of the Wall. "I had all the reasons to believe that a better world would come, but it never did," recently confessed this artist of the mind, who had previously accustomed us to militant films.

The youngest of the old masters admits that, with *I'm Going Home*, he wished to express his feeling for a waning century, "like a final farewell." If *Voyage to the Beginning of the World* (1997) felt like a photo album or some naive Fountain of Youth, *I'm Going Home* answers in a much more disillusioned tone, as a sad ode to the actual state of the world. Through this beautifully simple film, Oliveira and his alter ego character express a playful dismay for a tired humanity. A tad weary themselves, both this great actor and great director (better be prepared for some surprises from these two!) pass the torch to a new generation of cinephiles. But how are they going to handle it?

MADMAN BRANCO

A short portrait of Paulo Branco

Paulo Branco is the producer for *I'm Going Home*. A kamikaze warrior of the trade. While, in Quebec for example, a production company takes up to three years to develop and finance a feature-length project, Paulo Branco produces 10 to 12 films a year through his outfit, Madragoa Filmes. Combine his functions as a distributor (for Gemini Films) and you've got 50 movies distributed annually on the Portuguese market.

During the 70s, Branco was a programmer for a small 'art-house' theater in Paris. His cinephilic appetite then led him to develop a DIY production system founded on his devotion to a few unusual authors. In his dealings, he shows contempt for written contracts. « Some filmmakers find me insufferable and do not want to work with me anymore. I can't stand retaining the services of filmmakers through contracts, through obligations », he confessed to the Cahiers du cinéma back in 1999. While Manoel de Oliveira had only shot 4 or 5 feature films at the ripe age of 72, Branco since "gave him life back" by producing his... 16 last films!

Cédric Kahn, Michel Piccoli, Alain Tanner, Raul Ruiz, Li-

tuanian Sharunas Bartas, their iconoclast compatriot João César Monteiro and many youngsters from around the world complete this unique roster. The secret to financial viability with such obtuse films? Easy: quantity, loyalty and the sheer fun of doing a million things at once. What an exhausting fellow.

Who is Béla Tarr?

BÉLA TARR RETROSPECTIVE

For many, Béla Tarr might be the greatest active filmmaker today. Yet, you're probably asking yourself: "How come I don't know him!?" Let's set the record straight, and welcome you into an extraordinary and luminous world of darkness.

It was about six years ago. The NFB Cinema was showing a selection of Hungarian films. Amongst them, three or four films from Béla Tarr, including 1987's *Damnation* (or *Perdition* as it is listed in the Cinémathèque's current retrospective). A tremendous aesthetic shock! Much like the first Bergman or the first Tarkovsky I discovered as a teen. Eyes agape, I looked left and right. Nobody seemed to know. Books were silent. A complete mystery. Things have barely changed since; recognition is very hard to come for Béla Tarr, the lost sheep of motion pictures.

Revered in France, scarcely known in the rest of Europe, the work of Béla Tarr, unjustly qualified as austere, inspires a profound admiration while terrifying "the film market", for which it seems like a sterile monster, blind to commercial logic. Art...

Flashback. Born in 55, Béla Tarr starts developing his craft at a very young age. The Hungarian Golden Age (65-75) is waning and a new documentary school rises, wishing to "expose reality". Béla Tarr directs *Family Nest* in 1977. To this movement, which gave rise to another pair of socially-minded tarrian titles – *The Outsider* (80) and *The Prefab People* (82) – observers gave the name Budapest School (16mm, hand-held camera, improvised shooting and dialogues, devotion to Cassavetes, etc.). It did not last long. The School's young prodigy, Béla Tarr then does away with a certain form of realism. *Almanac of Fall* (84) and its bold aesthetic propositions are much talked about. In itself, the film constitutes the entirety of the filmmaker's second period, still completely ignored by international interest groups.

In 1985, Béla Tarr makes a decisive encounter with László Krasznahorkai, an atypical young writer still waiting to be translated here. Their union, combined with the contribution of composer Mihály Vig and Béla Tarr's editor wife Ágnes Hranitzky, leads to the creation of three memorable, blood-curdling films. It's the third period, starting with *Damnation* in 87, followed by *Satantango* (1991-1994) and *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000). A period of absolutist aesthetics. The author's mark can now be felt through some extraordinary slow, Guinness-worthy long takes of three to ten minutes; dense blocks of time, the impression that nothing happens but that anything can happen; minimalist screenplays; metaphysical, even cosmic concerns... Undoubtedly transcendental art.

This is certainly a contemplative and perfectionist era, yet, thematically speaking, the Hungarian filmmaker still shows an interest for the weight of History and the gravity of daily life. His people are "eager to scratch that spot where memory itches", to borrow critic Jean-Pierre Jeancolas' expression. Béla Tarr never thought the world to be a nice place to settle. He depicts his countrymen as depressed, destitute, morally bankrupt, caught in the apocalyptic, endless anticipation of rainy days. His choices are said to stem from a desire to show "his people's reality". One question in particular seems to haunt his work: is disorder part of the order of things, of the world? Partaking in this absurd tragedy (or tragicomedy) are slow, almost frozen characters, disfigured and perpetually drunk. In *Damnation*, their wanderings are accompanied by the incessant noise of old cable cars. In *Satan's Tango* (a mammoth, shocking, seven-and-a-half-hour film), a little girl tortures a cat in the mud before killing herself. In the nearly esoteric *Werckmeister Harmonies*, a population on the brink of disorder is shocked to find a whale's carcass and a strange prince-tyrant invading the public space.

While words are useless to describe the earthly power of these three films, it is crucial to address Béla Tarr's utopic desire to instill a "new cinematic time", forcing us to identify and partake in the languor of his characters, trapped in a decor reminiscent both of the great frescos of dereliction and the tiny portraits of destitution. In a normal, Americanized film, the average number of shots per 100 minutes is 1100. Béla Tarr, in his quest to stretch out time, to give it new parameters, supposedly closer to reality, graces us with 55 shots in 116 minutes for *Damnation*, 39 for *Werckmeister* in 2h20, and... 150 for *Satan's Tango* in 450 minutes! Behind such incredible visual gymnastics, the viewer is surprised to find metaphors and allegories about the end of communism and the Hungarian past... Béla Tarr will not hear

it, however. We cannot impute such motives in the actions of a self-described visual artisan. And yet...

A pessimistic completionist, a doomsday prophet, keen to restore the cinematograph's inherent candour, a tireless fighter struggling endlessly to find money for his cinematic stunts, Béla Tarr has long stopped telling stories. It makes no sense. The author once (jokingly) said that, if he did, his films would be ten minutes long! He'd rather frame the unfolding of life, states of mind, the act of anticipation, like a survivor, hell-bent on grasping the very last, abstract, metaphysical straw of things. Carbonized tales, sooty black humour: the cinema of Béla Tarr is unmistakably native to the wastelands of Hungary, very first in the number of yearly suicides before Finland and Quebec.

In this fast-paced era of video games and breezy blockbusters, the work of Béla Tarr – especially his last three opuses – resembles a wondrous and essential spot on a dying cinema's grandiose cv. Who knows toward what depths wizard Tarr will try to lead us? It's better to follow him blindly.

Ghosts of Iron

A REVIEW OF OCÉAN (CATHERINE MARTIN)

CATHERINE MARTIN, MAJOR FILMMAKER

A soothing camera uses ample tracking shots to embrace the motion of Via Rail's stout wagons. For the first twenty minutes, it's hard to make sense of director Catherine Martin's approach. To be frank, we couldn't care less, drawn as we are by a universe that is austere, yet tinged with reverie, by this poetic evocation akin to hypnotism. We follow her on the path – mostly un-beaten in Quebec – of contemplation. The film's plastic merits are undeniable.

Machinery, tools, men and women at work, disused railroads, decrepit old country stations, landscapes wrapped in sunlight or fog: Catherine Martin and her team follow and capture the Ocean's itinerary, the line that keeps connecting Montreal to Halifax (since 1876!). While freight trains are still active, the film quietly tells us that passengers are much less attracted by the "myth of the railroad." Those who really wish to take the train board in the larger cities, orphaning villages of their 'choo choo'... and of a certain dream.

THE EXILE OF TIME

Clearly, *Océan* is contemplative in nature, the work of an aesthete (I kept thinking about Resnais' *Chant du styrène* and the director's ability to perfectly lyricize a documentary about plastics!), less concerned by factual reality – we learn very little about the fate of the railway industry – than by the ins and outs of a sad and tired old dream. A cinema of loss and wait.

Océan is bathed in melancholy. Deprived of any verbose background, voice-over or talking heads, the film narrates the slow and progressive collapse of things through images and silence. Back in the day, railroads brought a certain material prosperity to Quebec villages (we think of colonization and its most basic tool, the railroad system). A certain peace of mind too, since

people saw them as a connection, a tenuous and reliable link to the big city. Today, the very same villagers hear only the faint echo of half-empty passenger trains, rolling late in the night. Only once daily.

Magnificent shots and sounds clash or interlock harmoniously, through the elevated art of arbitrariness. A burst of cello over here, two or three short interviews (couldn't we have sacrificed these moments altogether, and focused fully on the aesthetic, minimalistic and vaguely radical qualities of its approach?) over there. Less trains come by, times are changing, people are poorer, less motivated... A striking metaphor later, we start to envision it as a touching ode to the death of a certain cinéma d'auteur.

Catherine Martin (the sublime *Mariages*) is extremely coherent in her approach and continues to keep her spot in the dying brotherhood of pure filmmakers and cinephiles. When I grow up, I want to make films like Catherine Martin!

Extreme Theorem

A REVIEW OF VISITOR Q (TAKASHI MIIKE)

In 1968 was released what is perhaps Pier Paolo Pasolini's most beautiful film, *Teorema*. A true masterpiece. This critical allegory of contemporary family life – a stranger comes and disrupts the privileged existence of a rich Milanese family – would become one of the most inspiring and imitated films of the last thirty years. Drawing from such poetic cinema, the unpredictable, prolific (more than 50 productions in 10 years!) and over-rated Japanese beast that is Takashi Miike crafted an incendiary object, an extreme and, to be honest, totally delirious variation. We derive a genuine pleasure – sadistic, guilty, repulsive, but a pleasure nonetheless – from watching *Visitor Q*.

Everybody has heard of Miike, but rare are those (un)lucky enough to catch his films. Maybe you have seen the out-of-control *Audition* last year? A wild child, hell-bent on swiftly obliterating the spotless and secular façade of the Japanese empire, Takashi shoots at the speed of light, like a photo junkie whose bulimia is rarely impaired by maturity, subtlety, plausibility or too much intelligence! A striking hit or miss!

Grotesque eccentricities, cathartic ultra-violence, and a deeply-ingrained cynicism constitute the core of *Visitor Q*, a mostly astute tale – under its revolting veneer – that tackles the image of the Japanese family unit head-on. To put it bluntly, we could say that Takashi loves to combine the word 'unit' with the word 'demolition'.

HUMANS, WHAT WRETCHED THINGS!

In the eyes of Miike, humanity is one of the most ridiculous, expendable concepts with which we toy for a spell then discard without consideration. Just like the gorgeous Terence Stamp from *Teorema*, Visitor Q comes out of nowhere with his rock star looks. Settling without their permission with a fully dysfunctional family (the Royal Tenenbaums look like weaned kittens in comparison), our visitor beholds. Could he be an anthropologist? True psychotic chaos unfolds before his eyes.

The father of this happy house has sex with his daughter, a prostitute living in the city. Fired from his job as a TV author, he desperately tries to regain his position by proposing a disturbed and disturbing concept. Why not make a hit reality show by secretly filming his own son, the school's whipping boy, as he gets beaten up!? As for Mama Bear, she allows her son (the whipping boy, who cannot be denied his own 'power trips') to beat her senselessly. Following the assaults, she 'venerates' her wounds, prostitutes herself, shoots drugs, and finally discovers the joys of making milk squirt from her breasts! A fun program, which culminates with a feverish outburst of murder, necrophilia, and dismemberment. 18+. Show your IDs at the door!

Provided we give in to the extreme irony of this family portrait, we discover the devious and deformed vision of a moral agitator, a true filmmaker (the *mise en scène* of the chaos is quite convincing), who shows his true colours from the get-go: Japanese future simply does not exist. What follows is the furious and outraged demonstration of this primitive theory. Quite a punk, that Miike!

The Lack

ON LES FILS DE MARIE (CAROLE LAURE)

Some papers are awful to write. To say that Carole Laure's first film reeks of failure will not help anyone. To describe its overall ineptitude will not help men, nor whales or the moon. Maybe we need to approach it another way.

On paper, the project is far from dull. This idea of a woman weeping over the loss of her son, roaming through a desperate theatricalness, who decides to publish a strange ad — “mother having lost son is looking for son having lost mother” — constitutes a truly compelling screenwriting proposition. Had there been some *mise en scène* and inspiration involved, of course. Four guys are thereby introduced, pathetic and ponderous stereotypes to heal, support and accompany the madonna on her path. A battered teen, an obese man who dreads the gaze of others, a failed, masochistic artist, and, finally, a hopeless nut looking for psychosexual trips (Jean-Marc Barr, donned with a wig and ridiculous from start to finish). Marie goes from one lil' psycho-pop Jesus to the next, from one melodramatic skit to the next in order to find solace, redemption and a new life. The themes of loss and troubled motherhood are quite appealing also. On paper.

This badly played, social service «pasonilism» was shown at Cannes. Fair enough. We already knew that our cousins had a soft spot for Carole Laure. As for everything else, given how reason should, at some point, triumph over folklore, we simply cannot explain it. We can still rejoice over one thing, however. *Les fils de Marie* is a vision that stems from an author who, as she said in a recent interview, isn't overly preoccupied with critics, convinced that any personal endeavor should be respected as such. And she's right. We prefer to endorse the resounding failure of a sincere effort than the artistic pretensions of some populist vehicle.

Damn critics!

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

We're not in France. Thank God! Chastising critics isn't one of our national sports. That said, I heard again last week about the brilliant tactics used by Luc Besson, that undemocratic Hollywood spawn with a plan to dumb down the planet, which he believes is controlled by dirty intellectuals (critics who don't like his films, let alone his stupid career as a money-grubbing producer). He did it again. He banned press, which he hates since they scalded his *Grand bleu* all those years ago, from attending a private screening of *Taxi 3* a few days before its release. The reason invoked by the spiteful beast is just as clear as it is simple: he will show his baby only to those who have paid for their ticket. Full stop. No appeal. And he's not bothered with whom this bothers. Did you know that Luc Besson promised to direct ten films before stopping? He's made eight. Patience. Not a word, however, on the length of his career as a producer or even as a public persona... Pity.

After that, I re-indulged in some informative readings about that most dangerous year in France, 1999, the year of the Cannes scandal (*L'humanité* and *Rosette*), and the Patrice Leconte incident. In a letter that sparked a riot, Monsieur Ire singled out the damn critics, those who murder films and seek to destroy French cinema. He'd even dug out some Utter Nonsense blurted out by our friend Besson not long before: "Films are nice, they don't want to hurt anybody, so why beat up on them"? A surprising and lengthy debate ensued, which even had some timid repercussions over here.

As a third, more local observation: *Marie's Sons*. An absolute disgrace that some renowned 'specialists' in Quebec decided to support for reasons less outrageous than they are intellectually disturbing. And then I stopped, reflected upon those three observations and contemplated various questions, ranging from "What purpose do critics serve"? to "What did Quebec cinephiles do to deserve specialists willing to support Carole Laure's

film”? Amidst those, tons of other questions arose. Reading French critics, usually harsher, more aggressive, I realize that our own (comfy as they are) remain very polite and often without much ambition. Too indulgent, perhaps, and readily discredited in the public’s eyes.

And I contemplate other questions as well, but then this column ends... There will be a follow-up, however. I promise.

Damn critics! @

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

Two weeks ago, we were asking ourselves what the critics' purpose could be when, in France, 'authorz' like Luc Besson refuse to allow press screenings and when, in Quebec, they are not discontent with giving 3-4 stars to anything and everything.

I still believe them to be absolutely essential, these critics, when I quote the illustrious Serge Daney, who used to say that whenever a work of art is not facing its public, it is good to reunite them through some words and ideas. Critics are free. If they aren't, then they should fight for emancipation. Objectivity is a myth in this treacherous line of work; critical activity can only be fostered through a passionate and highly subjective approach to art. Any smart spectator or filmmaker understands that. And respects it, acknowledging that some lines should never be crossed ("lousy work" and "this director is a dumbass").

In the wake of November 1999, Patrice Leconte and some others (Corneau, Miller, Berri, Lelouch, Tavernier, Jolivet...) were set to publish a text demanding the following aberration: "We wish that no negative review of a film be published before the weekend following its release in theaters". But this abomination did not come to be, met with the wrath of some colleagues like Breillat, Blier, Klapisch, Sautet, Téchiné or Guédiguian. This just goes to show that some people still believe this to be a duel between good (filmmakers) and evil (critics).

I'm talking about France, but it's clear that many people here share the same scornful attitude.irate spectators, producers and distributors. So much so that our critics, now devoid of any critical sense (more akin to journalists and columnists), willingly play the game, opting for silence whenever the film we show them isn't good. And thus, Denise Filiatrault wonders for a full page in the Journal de Montréal why she isn't 'nominated' for more Jutra awards. Because, if critics had any balls and stopped shaking in their boots or doing meek promotional work, if they stopped equating quality with box office success, they would tell

her that her *Alice Tremblay* is a royal spud, burnt and left in the oven to dry.

Critics serve not only to yell or facilitate the promotional work of press agents. No. Neither does it help to encourage or discourage the public to see or not see a film (“The desire people have to see or not to see a film, the film’s ‘appeal value’ so to speak, is greater than the critic’s power to convince” - Truffaut). They serve – when they expand the trouble and knowledge – to incite dialogue with the spectator, to suggest ways to interpret films, to create a space for reflection, using a tone that differs from one critic to the next: incisive, rallying, smarmy, sharp or provocative. And this inherent right to critique, which some people try to suppress, leads us to an old observation, attributed more or less to Fritz Lang, who said that every person has two trades, his own and that of critics. In almost every publication, there is a Cinema section and, if apt critics are rather rare, entitled critics aren’t. As for anti-critics, theirs is indeed a new vocation amongst many, which concerns me a lot.

Headless Horror

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

I told you 100 times: I grew up watching horror films. Every time I step foot into a mall, I smell zombies; every time I see a dance academy, a witch's face appears; and the simple delight of dipping one's feet into a lake is enough for me to imagine a hulking hillbilly in a goalie mask. I'll let you connect the dots. Just like the nostalgic rock fan who stops listening to rock, convinced that "it was better before," I stopped gorging on horror films near the end of the 1980s.

The horror genre has died a quiet death sometime around 1986-1987, with *Hellraiser*, let's say. By that time, Freddy had become a trilogy and a tired self-parody. Zombies and cannibals belonged to folklore. The *Child's Play* doll reeked of an offensive aroma and the horror-comedy fad was starting to claim its first victims. Sure, there would be *Brain Dead*, *Blair Witch Project* and a few paranormal dramas from Hollywood, but it was really over. Why? It's hard to say.

The outline of an answer. By the end of the 1980s, studios' mindset had changed as they aggressively claimed the teen horror film market and transformed a genre once audacious and limitless (many titles circulated almost illicitly) into a strictly codified and prefabricated architecture meant to support national commercial releases by toning down gore or any offensive element. Aging filmmakers vainly tried their hand at making slick, hardly frightening fare. Films showcased none of the delirious semi-pro gimmicks from the Golden Age (1972-1984), blood was scarcer, laughter had put terror on welfare. Think about Wes Craven, a guy whose hunger for caricature, whose mockery and deconstruction of horror tropes (the *Scary Movie* series; have you seen the new poster? Frickin' hilarious!) has discouraged any layman who wished to develop an old-school slasher. The

damage is done. But the public is still there, embodied by a new generation of teens looking for thrills, resigned out of spite to procure DVD Collector's Editions of those sacrosanct films that once held a certain respect for the genre, those *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Last House on the Left* (from the very same Craven), or the already ironic *Evil Dead*...

I knew very well that *Wrong Turn* would have little to offer despite its claims of an 'old school' premise in which six post-teens are stuck in the woods, stalked by a bunch of cannibalistic maniacs. I went in as an observer, to gauge the efficiency of TV ads with my own eyes, as they'd been serenading teens for two whole weeks now. Opening night, 7:50 PM, at the AMC theater: it's impossible to ignore the hungriest of us, genre fans. We were barely 60 teenagers. A strange ritual ensues: to an inattentive public, jittery and loud, the screen offers every trailer for every horror film to come: the unanticipated *Freddy vs Jason*, *Godsend*, *Jeepers Creepers 2* and the truly intriguing *28 Days Later* (a zombie film shot on DV) by Danny Boyle! Then came 80 meager minutes of B-movie fare for the main course, a rather insulting offering for any seasoned observer. Same clichés, same girls in the same tank tops, with the same moist, curvy bust. In defense of *Wrong Turn*, who still never lives up to the slashers of old, to the genre's spiritual uncle *Deliverance*, or to the morbid, vicious sensibility of *I Spit on your Grave*, the film boasts a rare amount of gore for today's standards, it rejects any humour and fosters such hatred for the villains as to make us wish for their demise with all of our hearts. Yet, on that night, a subtle wind of sorrow and nostalgia whisked over the theater.

" Being a nobody "

Can I say 'I'? I think I can. I'm not very happy, these days. The cuffs feel tight around my wrists. My tongue is burning. My situation isn't unique at all. I'm almost 30 years old; I'm a young filmmaker from Quebec, looking for myself. And strangely, this is not a choice. I'm actually forced to keep looking for myself. By whom? Well, by those fuckin' guys! I'm deathly afraid of one day unclenching my fists and being filled with resentment.

I will tell you parts of my life, not to brag, but to convince myself that it probably looks like that of many others. When I turn 18, I'm no longer crazy about zombie films. Since I discovered Pasolini's *Teorema* or Zulawski's *That Most Important Thing: Love*, I left my zombies behind. After CEGEP, I decide to make films. Any which way if I have to. I slap English subtitles on them. To be seen around Europe, by Anglos in Winnipeg, but also by Chicoutimiens in Chicoutimi. My friends become actors, sound engineers...

I start doing radio at CIBL. In 1997, I come up with *Des tortues dans la pluie*. Some people like my turtles; the turtles are shown at the Rendez-vous, in Toronto, in Portugal and elsewhere. It's cool. Let's keep it up. So, I make other films, always for 500\$, between friends. In 1999, after *Old Fashion Waltz*, I'm told that perhaps I have some talent. Me being a dumbass, proud to show the film in 2-3 festivals, I start to believe it. I go for SODEC's Jeunes Créateurs program: I ask for some bucks to shoot a project with the participation of Pierre Lebeau. I'm thrown out pretty harshly. Ok, maybe the story of an EMT who meets an angel on Christmas Eve isn't such a good idea... Ok. I shoot *Seconde Valse* (2000) over a weekend with two kids; the film is a huge success on the festival circuit. Same thing for *Kosovolove* (2000), shot for peanuts with a bunch of actors who are starting to look like family. A poor family, but a family nonetheless.

Back to the SODEC with *Les Petits Cagney*, a more ambitious project. I'm shoved aside once more, under surprising pretenses. Not a big deal; I'm not the first one to whom this happens.

I shoot the film anyway: fundraising party, 8 fully accredited UDA actors, four days of shooting, friends to whom I still owe a lot. We're starting to feel comfortable being rejected and begging. I'm starting to make a name for myself, and people ask me: "aren't you tired of shorts, when will you do a feature?" I'm still wishing for it, my very first short on 35mm, with beautiful colors, beautiful sound, a proper team and proper marketing... I write *La Sphatte*, a rather radical proposition, I admit. Third rejection from SODEC.

I have time to shoot *L'Hypoténuse* and *Mécanique de l'assassin* during the summer of 2002. Video shorts again, shot for 300-500\$. I don't know what to do anymore. I continue working as a critic, turning down music video, publicity and TV work. What can I fuckin' do? I'm starting to look like a caricature, failure incarnate, the kid with a thousand shorts? Maybe I need better contacts... I roll up my sleeves and knock at SODEC's door once again (that said, the Council for the Arts also delighted me with their own denials) with the notorious *Sphatte*. April 2003: fourth refusal for reasons I don't even want to know. Eight years working as a critic, ten self-produced short films, more than 25 festivals, a retrospective at the Cinémathèque, mostly positive reviews in local newspapers... The State has convinced me: I am a nobody.

Maybe I'll regret this article, written in the heat of the moment. Just let me hope that I'm not the only one in this situation. Tell me that some of you fit that same profile, darkened by national shame, where talent, dedication and audacity are fostered so little as opposed to slick, soulless moneymaking products.

A ghost panel from SODEC tells a young filmmaker what to improve in a screenplay that's inevitably refused. Fair enough. All comments are duly noted, corrections are made by said filmmaker... who's turned down just as swiftly by the next panel, made up of different people with different tastes and criteria!! Where's the logic and the constructive feedback in this shitty bureaucratic process? From my standpoint, I thought I had a righteous path, I thought I made all the right steps, persevered as hard as I could... I guess I'll just keep on watching films from overseas, thinking cruelly to myself: "what a beautiful film, never would it have been produced in Quebec." The situation is even worse in the rest of Canada.

As I'm going to work in the morning, I see a bearded man in the subway. He seems about 40. Without all of his head. From sun-up to sun-down, he roams a corridor. Non-stop, back and forth, rubbing his feet every five minutes. He's walking. Nobo-

dy talks to him of course. He's always there. Always. The other day, I tripped. He looked up at me and... he'd traded his face for mine. I freaked. Guess I'll go and shake his hand tomorrow morning... Fuckin' shit!

Nothing

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

I'm told that it's the best place to dwell on my thoughts. I'll take advantage of it then, even if it means that you'll disagree with me. Nothing is going on. I feel that nothing is going on, and I'm aggravated. We saw it coming (globalization, multiplexes, the Hollywoodian hegemony, etc.), but amidst the prevailing mediocrity and the weekly blows, my passion for cinema now weighs a ton... I'd prefer to be a fan of skydiving, of origami, of stamps. I've been reporting movie news for many years now, every week, and had never felt such emptiness than in these times of slim cinematic pickings, between Mel's « This is my gore » and *Hellboy*. And so we wait. We wait to darken some paper by discussing those films, those who have something to say, but remain stuck in their country, imprisoned by the new parameters of a pricey commercial distribution system.

Reasons are plentiful: many problems arise with the distribution itself, worries about down-and-out or penniless distributors. Our loony has a broken leg and buying a foreign film costs a fortune, only to recoup 30% of its initial cost at ExCentris... Any takers? Then, there are all these dumb people, distributors for whom cinephilia means nothing, willing only to spend peanuts on *La peau blanche's* marketing, convinced that Resnais (*Not on the Lips*), Rohmer (*Triple agent*), Rivette (*The Story of Marie and Julien*) are no longer fit for release at Le Parisien. Maybe we'll finally get to see their films when the copyrights are cheaper, 8 or 10 months down the line. Pfff... Did you know that *Uzak*, a wonderful Turkish film, and *Since Otar Left...*, a wonderful French film, will be released on May 21st? Thanks to whom? Thanks to the good care of Mongrel Media, a distributor from Toronto! Still interested in the big screen? You guys are still going to the movies? Nothing is going on.

How many films without a Hollywoodian passport are released each week in Montreal, French metropolis of Ameri-

ca? Two, three? We could come up with numbers, draw big red diagrams... I know, I know: proportionality, culture, heritage, but in Paris, there were 14 last week (including *Brown Bunny*) and 16 this week (including *L'isola*). Let me tell you. I'd love to write only about DVD re-releases or even good old films on VHS if I had to. For the pleasure of cinephilia, and images that matter. Let's do half a page on *Sunset Boulevard*, a big old column of passionate reflections about Dreyer and a good paper about Monte Hellman. Or Disney's cartoons. I could recount the life of Victor Argo, lost this week. As the damned of the news, we are tied to saint Innovation, whose appearances are scarcer and scarcer. Let's do the work then, provide information about the treat of the week (*The Punisher* and his friends). But let's not fool ourselves: nothing is going on. Our salvation lies on the sofa, with a DVD in the slot, a bunch of chips in one hand and a notepad in the other. Communion and common experiences have long gone to the dogs.

Blasé? Of course, but the core remains passionate, eager to embrace rare seasonal gems, willing to declare that cinema is not dead. Should we approach its cycles another way, conceal its most shameless manifestations, leave it to others and muffle the sound of its false exploits to come (*Batman 5, Die Hard 4, Crimson Rivers 2*)?

Say... just how cool is skydiving exactly?

In My Skin

REVIEW OF *DANS MA PEAU* (MARINA DE VAN)

A working woman discovers her body and slowly breaks away from it. Devouring passion. Narcissistic passion. Passion for oneself, hatred for oneself. What Marina de Van (who also plays Esther) captures in this film, where the body is invited to a merciless duel, is the unlikely encounter between her own skin and the social fabric of which she refuses to be a part of. We could say that Esther's flesh is part of the public domain. "Consume me or I will consume everything", she whispers to a world that has other fish to fry than to dwell on the specificities of each of its constituent bodies.

During the painful course of *Dans ma peau*, Esther's body and mind separate. The experience at hand reaches heights of intensity that Cronenberg's over-stylized *Crash* (a cousin film) could never reach. "For long, I've had a vested interest for anything having to do with the strangeness and opacity of the body. To what extent does my body belong to me, is "it" mine, and to what extent, as a material object, is it an object like any other on the planet? What's inside? I, myself, have kept this childish desire and curiosity to see and touch what's hidden, and what the skin hides", declares Marina de Van, who, we uneasily discover, seems to have injected her strange films with her own torments and life experiences.

Esther works for a polling firm in a careerist world where her boyfriend (Laurent Lucas) thinks big, surrounded by social climbers nourished only by further steps in the professional ladder. One night, at a party (that resembles the triggering element of *Eyes Wide Shut's* intimate tragedy), Esther stumbles in the garden and seriously injures her leg. Hours go by and

rushing to the emergency doesn't seem to be a priority under the circumstances. Strange. Her doctor reprimands her (think about tetanus!) and her boyfriend yells at her. From then on, Esther – who's nothing of a freak – coldly embarks on an inexplicable spiral, obsessive and pathological, under the influence of which she isolates herself, probes and mutilates her slender, skinny, muscular body, widening and exacerbating barely scarred wounds. The exploratory cannibalisation of this strange, untameable body, unresponsive to a silenced conscience, painfully establishes itself.

Centered on a topic that might appear extreme or scabrous to some, more sociological or metaphysical to others, *Dans ma peau* addresses a certain urban malaise, in all of its casual obsessions. Whether they're tied to anorexia, alcoholism, drug addiction, pedophilia, assorted fetishes, sugar addiction, the unhealthy fascination with stamps or with ornithology (!), the first feature film from this ex-collaborator of François Ozon seems to gnaw at the core of all pathologies, while juggling metaphors with impressive ease. "I worked only to demonstrate the impulsive nature of the character's behaviour. And to expose the internal conflict to which we succumb when, like everybody else, unexplainable impulses, contrary to our normal goals, brutally overwhelm us", says de Van, adding that it would have been impossible to give the role to another actress "who wouldn't have been accustomed right away to the same body issues as me".

An abrupt, open ending for a especially opaque issue, here's perhaps the stream meant to irrigate this sick film, highlighted by meticulously composed framings, the mesmerizing music of jazzman Esbjörn Svensson and some bloody outbursts that we shall not soon forget!

Everything's Fine

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

Did you notice I had gone to the farthest depths of the world for more than a month? No? It doesn't matter. I certainly did. Thanks to my friend Defoy for taking over so gallantly. Far, far away did our nifty team go; to see and shoot a replica of the world's end, 1500 km north of Montreal, where paved roads are no more: LG2, the municipality of Radisson, 400 souls. A place built for hydro-electrical work some 30 years ago, which should have closed its doors in 1995. Irreducible Gauls who said no and kept this sheet metal cabin country alive ever since, on a hill 600 km away from the nearest white settlement. It's as if David Lynch was hidden behind each and every one of those basement-free lazarettos. Hydro-Quebec trucks haunt the rocky roads while the town's twenty-teens await their next order from the Sears catalog and keep telling us that, in the middle-north called James Bay, summer starts on the 15th of July and ends on the 16th! And damned if the northern lights aren't beautiful!

A feature film to shoot. I'll spare you the details of our dramatic saga, but the topics of interest didn't lack. I could have shone the light of our Kodak upon any of those out-of-place people. Those who, having two or three things to amend for, have washed up in Radisson to « hide » away! Rumors whizzed... An Italian man from Palermo, who landed in Radisson then stayed on for 25 years; these two Montrealers living on the outskirts of the village in a tipi guarded by hounds; and then this shady priest, really shady, distressed by having to celebrate mass for only one or two devotees in his metallic blue temple with orange straight chairs. Another subject? 120 km from Radisson, the Cree reserve of Chisasibi. Where true tales of jealous neighbors, alcohol, drugs, and gambling unfold (you want real social drama? a real disgusting story about Loto-Québec? Then

stop shooting your short reports about alcohol abuse and compulsive gambling in Montreal: go over there, where people die at the top of their voice and your heart breaks in half!) Anyway, had we lost our mainspring along the way, turning around on a dime would have been quite simple.

If cinema wishes to venture there, it must do so thoughtfully. Do you remember David Mamet's excellent *State & Main*? This crew from Hollywood, mandated to shoot and literally devour the soul of a peaceful hamlet? It takes only a few hours, mic outstretched, camera on, with a free-roaming actor to trigger a slight commotion in my mind. It is ten times more challenging when a production team, like ours, requires performances by non-professionals. I learned by doing, as they say. We talk to them like super-beginners, almost like children, until we're blown away by how natural they look on the very first take. We nervously prepare three lines of dialogue when four pages would have been no problem. My advice to young filmmakers: don't ask your stepdad to 'play,' ask him to 'be.' Don't go looking for the 'right' tone, demand 'life.' These are two things about cinema I learned the hard way in Radisson, P.Q. Everything's fine.

Then, we have to come back from this geographic impossibility, where home fronts are littered with mounds of rotting moose heads (September = hunting season) to be reacquainted with our daily urban struggles. What time is it here exactly? I fled the mediocrity of those jobbers who, in August, managed to find redeeming qualities in *The Five of Us*. I come back and they're still dirtying the landscape while the surprising *Mean Creek* has long been forgotten. Russ Meyer, Rodney Dangerfield, Superman and the Expos were still around when I left. I come back to see that Jeff Fillion is still breathing and that *Les Beaux dimanches* were stolen away from me in exchange for a dull fat guy in fake 3D latex followed by another thing everyone keeps talking about. We're buying used submarines, we give Mario Jean a TV show, we let Haiti die out, we bet our old Nordiques jersey on who is going to take back the FFM, we kidnap Stan, the ostrich from Bily Kun... It seems that everybody was really busy in the big news department. Here I am, back in the saddle, and the joke's over! Time to talk about real things: the Festival du nouveau cinéma, *Team America*, *Seed of Chucky*, Alys Robi...

Cine-disaster

A SHORT REVIEW OF NOUVELLE-FRANCE (JEAN BEAUDIN)

Oh my. I wonder if anybody was motivated by the costly endeavour that is *Nouvelle-France* for even one minute. Narrating with regressive banality an impossible colony-day romance between a miller's daughter and a woodsman, the makers of this TV-grade turd were aiming solely for an eventual, and saddening, box-office performance. *Nouvelle-France* is no historical film. Any information pertaining to our history is promptly wiped out to make room for an inane dramaturgy drowned out by an inedible overbid of strings. If Noémie Godin-Vigneau emerges spotless from such romantic sludge, this cannot be said for the rest of the cast; international stars wishing they were elsewhere and local actors left to fend for themselves, forced to bear the French accent, but also their faded wigs and costumes in the midst of some flavourless folkloric decors. Cinema as conceived by lazy producers and distributors, wasteful and ultra-unionized.

At the heart of this hardly-novel cultural product, lies a very upsetting and shamelessly displayed desire to score as big as *Séraphin*. While the common thread between the two is writer Pierre Billon, responsible for the film's so-called screenplay, we also notice that Noémie Godin-Vigneau plays Karine Vanasse while David La Haye (the epitome of squandered talent here) is forced to copy Roy Dupuis. Céline Dion replaces Isabelle Boulay for the final musical offense... It's Melenny Productions (*Les boys, Les dangereux*) against Cité-Amérique (*Séraphin*) on the production front and, finally, on the distribution front, Christal Films begrudging Alliance, reaching for those millions that it failed to generate with *Les dangereux*. So obvious, so pathetic and so mercantile an attempt! Even worst: who authorized this to be shown publicly to the French critics? This is going to get ugly!

A bad taste in my mouth

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

Sorry for being insistent, but the pompous release of *Nouvelle-France* left a really bad taste in my mouth. It had been a year since we took notice of the young Noémie Godin-Vigneau's talent and charisma and our intention to put her face on the front page of our modest rag was perfectly sincere. The release of *Nouvelle-France* thus became a simple pretext for us to shed a well-deserved spotlight on a great actress to be.

I had to be frank and tell Noémie from the start that I had no intention of discussing Beaudin's film, nor the ridiculous thread that constitutes her character. A brutal and embarrassing moment for the young actress to live through, as for the journalist. On that morning, we would play no game, no matter what people expected. We talked about Noémie Godin-Vigneau, the girl from Hull who dreams of Argentina and holds a profound respect for artists such as Wajdi Mouawad and Brigitte Haentjens. It was nice, and miles away from the onerous cardboard sets of the 30M\$ dud, sponsored by a horde of backers, including a ham company!

Noémie had done 19 interviews the day before, mostly expeditious ones, according to her. In her eyes shone the sorrow of a girl forced to sell raisin bread to feed a machine hell-bent on regurgitating films like Hygrade regurgitates sausages. And there was no need for Noémie's testimony to figure out that, behind those 19 interviews, there's (almost) an equal number of complacent cultural jobbers (the very same people that we could hear giggling during the press screening) asking the same questions, in the same order, pretending to have loved the film, piecing together papers in record time, packaging and delivering them promptly to the client, then pursuing the search for the next star, the next film, the next cookbook. The ultimate proof

lies in this lamentable ‘interview’ on the set of *Tout le monde en parle*: forced to talk about Gérard Depardieu for three whole minutes, teased for a while about her pseudo-hippie childhood and compelled for another three, if not five, minutes to smile politely during a... quiz about New France.

At the receiving end of the chain, filmgoers blinded by some stellar PR work, relegated obediently by every single press organ out there. *CQ2* is very average, but Carole Laure appears everywhere and anywhere. *Nouvelle-France* is much worse, and Noémie is pressured to appear everywhere. The next film from the next actor or the next comedian won’t be good either, but it will appear everywhere. The machine whose gears I see turning from my desk, my e-mail, my answering machine, is truly frightening. It has the ability to stuff any information in your mind through a simple press release, useless but insistent, pompous.

Relaying ‘information’ is the stuff of TV shows, news reports, daily cultural columns, weekly magazines, webzines. “*La grande séduction* close to reaching 2M\$ at the box-office”, “*Camping sauvage* millionaire at the box-office...” This is called disguised advertising, not information! Let’s be honest, my lazy friends from the press: while it is true that you have daily newspaper columns to fill, who is it that forces you to always reprise the same non-news produced by jaded press agents?

“The commercial race and the surrounding presswork makes me feel trapped, a hurdle to my freedom of speech and of expression”, confided Noémie during our interview. We wish you not to crack; we wish you Argentina, the sun, serenity, and the end of complacent news reporting.

Chocking on my chocolate croissant

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

*“ Laugh at a bad reputation.
Fear a good one that you could not sustain ”*
— ROBERT BRESSON

On November 25th, I was all lively, munching on a chocolate croissant, cruising to a press screening of *Life Is a Miracle*. “Barred for life, Côté,” I’m told by the person responsible to “enforce the rules.” Enough to choke on my croissant. “Ah, belched I, and why?” My fellow critics may be just as staunch in their reviews of that old mantle that is *Nouvelle-France*, but Denis Côté is a special case! He’s barred for life for making personal attacks by stating (careful, what follows might deprive the film of a few tenners at the box-office) that it belongs to a cinema of producers and distributors, lazy and mercantile, wishing to copy *Séraphin*’s success. Did I utter any falsity? A few months after the “Alliance affair” (now resolved), I’m still barred by distributor Christal Films and its president, Christian Larouche.

The art of ‘banishment’ is not exclusive to our furry friends with their flat tails. Here like elsewhere, in the 1980s especially, producers, distributors and theater owners understood their power. And they owned it. A film critic is like any other link in a film’s promotional chain. Anyone who dares deviate will be barred. Want some examples? Already, in 1976, producer Pierre David, backed by the producers’ Association of Quebec, asked the managers of *Le Devoir* to make sure that critic André Leroux refrains from ever writing about Quebec cinema!

Then, there was Bernard Boulad, ‘barred’ from the Montreal

World Film Festival. Another telling case occurred in 1993. Christal Films was called C/FP back then. Upon the release of Paule Baillargeon's *Sexe des étoiles, 24 images*' editorial board decides to use a photo of the film for its front page. But Christian Larouche wants them to use the promotional poster instead! Confronted with the magazine's legitimate refusal, this great man of culture then promised to have the magazine sued and to send his lawyers. Until 1999, the magazine's critics were barred from press screenings and from receiving press kits. It took a personal intervention from Pierre Falardeau, upon the release of *Miracle à Memphis*, to unofficially (not officially) settle this crime of *lèse-majesté*.

In France, aside from Luc Besson's tantrums (we just heard that he lost his most recent lawsuit against *Libération*), other cases are symptomatic of a certain disdain for film criticism. Think of our friend Jeunet, who banned Serge Kaganski and the people of *Les Inrockuptibles* from attending the press screening of *A Very Long Engagement* because they'd expressed concern about *Amélie*'s slightly lepenist aroma. And Bertrand Tavernier, who 'barred' our former colleague Antoine Guillot because he didn't enjoy his last appearance on Antoine's show for France Culture! Believe it or not, *Télérama* has now been banned from press screenings for a whole year by Warner Bros as Eastwood's *Mystic River* did not appear in their rankings for the Best films of the year!!!

In the States, Steve Ramos from *CityBeat*, a Cincinnati outfit, was banned from press screenings by a theater owner. Ramos had discovered that Mr. Goldman had cut three very risky seconds from Wayne Wang's *The Center of the World*. Ramos discovered it and wrote about it; Fox removed the copy of the film from said theater. Later, Goldman 'barred' Ramos, then apologized. Aside from the hardships experienced by the great Pauline Kael — fired from *McCall's* because of a negative review about *The Sound of Music*, then hired by the *New Yorker* in the 1960s —, we remember an anecdote from March 1968. Renata Adler from the *New York Times* watched as the United Artists bought a full page of advertisement to denounce her tastes. After naming every popular film Adler had shattered, the UA then encouraged people to go and see those films she loathed so much; what a fine barometer that was! How sad...

Thinking The Land

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

We can film it from any side, from any angle, it remains a mystery. Quebec's land is a monster. We may be under the impression that it was tamed by the fathers of direct cinema; that Gilles Carle has sublimated its most whimsical faces through fiction... but what if things weren't so? What if, each year, new documents from new, unexplored corners made us realize that the monstrous Quebec, immense, austere, scarred by a schizophrenic identity, was still a stranger? It's the impression that emanates from films like *Le père de Gracile, 2000 fois par jour*, *Le temps des Madelinots*, all of which echo the works of Arthur Lamothe, currently featured at the Cinémathèque.

To each film its own viewpoint and its own way to survey a land abused by collective memory, but constantly recaptured by the curiosity of creators. It's great to see directors Stéphanie Lanthier and Myriam Pelletier-Gilbert plant their camera in the farthest corners (Middle-North or Abitibi) and capture the great adventure of planting. Far more than a hippie's trip, the process involving the rejuvenation of dead forests attracts young people from around the world, people with each their own story, hungry for a challenge or a simple escape. Rather unfriendly is this 'planting' process, amidst black flies, swampy grounds and potential injuries. "We're a mix between machines, animals and athletes," confides one of the valiant characters from *2000 fois par jour*, at once a declaration of love and hatred towards the land. The camera's gaze is confrontational, fiery, and painful. Miles away from the comfortable and contemplative posture adopted by author Richard Lavoie in *Le temps des Madelinots*.

Lavoie's relationship to the Magdalen Islands' territory is somewhat bulimic. Here, we love big. Without half-measures. Empathy and the pleasure of trusting such precious time, almost

frozen: each corner of the archipelago is probed with tact and calm, the camera framing everyone with equal love, driven by a nearly pathological democratic impulse. Through its wanderings, the film manifests an ode to men, without any real concern for structure, in a tranquil chaos: here lobster fishing, there the impact of the touristic industry on the isles, a choir of diverse accents, agriculture, summer, winter, knitting and tutti quanti. Lavoie turns every stone with all the cool of a sightseeing dilettante. Defining the land, for this prolific filmmaker, can only be achieved through meeting and valorizing the human treasures that it harbors. Poetry stems from dispersal in this, a truly grand encyclopedia of rural living.

This naturally brings us to the legacy of Brault and Perrault. But that would be forgetting Arthur Lamothe, another one of the greats, now 77 years old. His work reveals less of a pleasure, or a love-hate relationship, than an insatiable desire to address the contradictions inherent to the richness and plurality of Quebec's land. 1969's *Le mépris n'aura qu'un temps* remains a rare, empathic proletarian charge, the product of a quickly-evolving social space, a film that remakes the world in pubs and on the street, free of any intellectual flourish. It's also imperative to reunite with a cornerstone of the Lamotheian wall, *Bûcherons de la Manouane*, which constitutes a genuinely frank conversation, almost a confrontation with the land.

Just like the authors mentioned above, Lamothe goes beyond folklore. Despite the film's dated voice-over, at once didactic and pompous (even censored by the NFB in 1962), it remains a vivid testimony of the workers' generosity amidst a rigorous, nearly immutable land. The snow creaking under their footsteps, horses sinking under its surface, the climactic elegy, the unforgettable transition between the unloading of logs in the river and the unloading of spuds on a plate. Everything's been covered, and the monstrous Quebec is content, lacking neither images nor imagination.

Maybe I'm wrong

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

How do we define a good screenplay today, in 2005? The same way as before... a good story observing a few golden rules? I still have my doubts. Whether you're a lost student, a teacher content with the validity of his syllabus, an unconditional admirer of *mise-en-scène* triumphant or a supporter of the olden, sententious maxim according to which "one can make a bad film from a good screenplay, but never a good film from a bad screenplay": the very notion of a screenplay tends to disappear. Despite the whims entertained by those attached to the Hollywoodian ice cream machine. As you know, I generally steer clear of formulas, belonging to those who would rather celebrate directors, these alchemists who can transform a gush of light, a woman's face, an opportune gust of wind, or a fleeting thought scribbled on a matchbox into a narrative akin to pure beauty.

Two worlds hence two types of spectators, necessarily. First, in the left corner... I came across an old article from a magazine. May 2001, I believe, although it might have been February 1979 or October 2033. A guy, David Siegel, perhaps a genius, probably a charlatan, pretends to have pegged down the typical dramatic course of any film. In opposition to the old three-act structure so dear to Aristotle, he 'invented' the *Nine-Act Structure* and offers his services (\$\$) on his website to whoever wishes to turn his film into a commercial success. He's full of wind, this pencil God, but something tells me that the guy is well respected in his field, despite the fact that he brazenly borrows from the bombastic theories of celebrated mentor Syd Field. Self-proclaimed pope of 'postmodernist' screenwriting (curse this word...), he makes money by teaching, with no irony whatsoever, what constitutes "a good commercial film," from Act 0 to Act 8. On his website, you can also look up the top 100 films... that gar-

nered the most money (GOOD films therefore) throughout the years. *Home Alone* is 6th; *Beverly Hills Cop* is 11th...

Suffice it to say that the cult of revenues is still very much alive, starting in film school. Not only ago, we still taught the watertight perfection of *Witness*' screenplay. From these timeless cramming tactics, let's move on to the right corner and those films that shake things up on the international festival front. Let's be frank here, aside from an Oscar here or there, the names of directors willing to apply a magical formula rarely become references. Orson Welles wasn't well-liked, nor was Cassavetes, Antonioni was booed in his time and the new authors from Asia are said to have been pelting flavourless gruel for the last decade. Where do rules fit in these directors' work? Well, they make up their own rules.

I was watching the *making-of* Turkish film *Uzak* earlier this week. Author Nuri Bilge Ceylan walks through a snowy landscape, stops his minuscule team in front of some rusty piece of machinery. He asks for the camera to be placed in a certain spot and he shoots, without any script or storyboard. Sitting in a café, still without a screenplay, he relates the context to his protagonists, who improvise around it... I also remembered the huge *Good Bye Dragon Inn* from the huge Tsai Ming-liang: the whole story must fit within two paragraphs! Then there's *The World*, this week, which obeys only to its own melancholia while eloquently addressing modern times. And what else? The cinema that we support, from Claire Denis to Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Harmony Korine... Moral of this story: I may be wrong, but, outlook for outlook, storyteller for storyteller, a 'good' screenplay, a solid screenplay no longer exists, at least not without a real vision to support it.

Let us not forget one thing, however: the proportion of spectators still, and forever, wishing to be told a story (to be held by the hand) is still superior to the number of those who accept from an author that they interpret the world in their own way, by highlighting their signature, by turning their doubts into images rather than relying on screenwriting 'certitudes'. Why not give up; we're surrounded.

A one-way ticket to Planet Tsai

RETROSPECTIVE AND INTERVIEW

To consider oneself a cinephile without delving into the unique, masterful and coherent work of Tsai Ming-liang is grounds for excommunication. This cheerful Taiwanese man, now 47, was born in Malaysia, but decided to emulate friends and pursue higher learning in Taipei at age 20. Seven award-winning films later, he is now part of the great Taiwanese film triumvirate, alongside Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang. More of a plastician, more of a stranger to public success than his colleagues, the director of *The Hole* is also a controversial artist. Confronted with the critical success and the many accolades he received worldwide, some high-ranking officers decided to cut him off from any subsidies on the ground that he was “a foreigner who glorified homosexuality.”

That said, it would be mad not to commend or notice such an essential corpus of essays regarding our world, endangered by individualism and the sterility of human relationships. Being a fan of long takes, an adept of the “one shot/one scene” philosophy, Tsai Ming-liang locates his art within harrowing boundaries, each film responding rather oddly to its predecessor through the use of spaces at once geographical (claustrophobic Taipei), corporeal (the site of all ‘encounters’) and mental (gut-wrenching moral wastelands). People claimed that contemporary cinema was that of solitude and wandering bodies. Without adhering to this cliché, we must stress that Tsai Ming-liang is the absolute master of such a trade, all categories and schools combined.

Yet, emptiness and solitude are not sad, or hermetic lands. While it’s true that Tsai’s universes are slow and quiet, never does absurdity leave their perfectionist architecture, where wa-

ter flows constantly, as if in a lengthy poem, both humid and sensual. From *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992) to *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003), the world of the living enjoys a tranquil wedding with that of the dead. And the author's way of filming outside of the world is often hilarious, even if his cinema ultimately talks of pain.

An extraordinary light, a weightlessness that invests the whole screen, a serene series of finely framed chassés-croisés, minimalistic threads: the cinema of Tsai Ming-liang is slightly redundant, argue his detractors. We retort that the very talent necessary for its elaboration is enough to silence even the staunchest nagger. And this cinema owes a lot to its revenants, such as the actor whom we follow playfully from film to film: Lee Kang-sheng, less and less of a young man, genuine and Bressonian who Tsai molds from one cinematographic experience to the next in order to transform him into an increasingly touching and increasingly erotic emotional vector. Needless to try and describe this character more accurately than critic André Roy when he declares that: "Lee Kang-sheng fights death in our stead." That very same Lee (always designated by the diminutive Hsiao-kang in Tsai's films) becomes a porn star in *The Wayward Cloud*, the latest of Tsai's films to come out of the oven, the object of a one-time special screening tonight and tonight only. A vital outing if ever there was one.

THE MEETING

The author's work was often cited in these pages. Our favourite film is *The River* (1996). We consider *What Time Is It There?* (2001) to be a summary film. And we hold a special affection for the wonderfully slow *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, a powerful homage, exempt of melancholic weight, to the passage of time, to cinema and to solitary men. It was upon the 2003 TIFF release of the film that we finally got to meet his legendary filmmaker. Cheerful, but impeded by the language barrier, he still listened to our questions with exemplary generosity. Here are some very short excerpts from an unforgettable moment of cinephilic bonding.

In *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, you film the agony of cinema. Surely, you also wish to comment on the progressive death of certain filmmaking practices, right?

When you look at the film, perhaps you start wondering about the true nature of cinema and the act of filming. That is what matters to me. *Goodbye...* is a film about the way we gaze upon the art of filmmaking. People my age know that, as young people, we were perfectly aware of the importance of being in theaters. We felt a sensation akin to communion. There exists a

real relationship between the person who gazes and the object of their gaze.

Your three first features were more dramatic and contained more social references. In your last three films, you seem to indulge in a rather unique humour, unrelated to any social fabric...

As I'm getting older, I close up a little bit; it's normal to develop a more personal signature. If my films seem like jokes now, it is perhaps because reality is becoming more and more ridiculous in my eyes. My way of approaching reality today is through humour; I have no other choice. I'm not trying to make comedies, yet something in my mind cries out whenever I'm about to shoot, and emphasizes how funny this all is.

What's your relation to time in your personal life? (*laughs*)

Here is my watch. I don't have a wristband, so it stays in my pocket. It is broken and I don't know how to fix it so as to finally be on time for interviews! I read a book about Buddhism recently, which suggested that time simply does not exist. I totally agree with that. In *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, time does not exist. Whenever you wish to experience the film, you absolutely have to accept its artificial temporality.

How do you react when people state that you are one of the great masters of modern cinema?

Honestly, a lot of people hate my films! (*laughs*) A respected Taiwanese intellectual once said that *Vive l'amour* featured all the worst things that cinema has to offer. I still consider myself lucky to be acknowledged. Film as a work of art is very embarrassing to craft and to assume. Cinema is tied to commerce, to performance and to investment. My motivation resides in this small group of people who support and respect me. Particularly the critics.

Every film ends with the credits

« REPÉRAGE » COLUMN

At the time where I write these lines, I haven't seen a single film since April 20th! A record? Probably. The reason for this regimen: «*Au-dessus des vieux volcans/Glisse des ailes sous les tapis du vent/Voyage, voyage*» sang Desireless, the French woman with a hi-top haircut. I reached those corners of the world where people inevitably ask, in broken English: “*Why are you here in my country?*” “*For fun, for fun!*” replies the Québécois wayfarer to his dumbstruck interlocutor. I've made my own films in Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria. Three countries, three completely different mental pictures.

Between the Otopeni airport and the capital, Bucharest, sitting alongside Florin, our Joe Taxi, unleashed in his roaring Dacia, I quickly convince myself that Romania will be a grand scale melodrama! In the land of roaming dogs and gypsy kids, the film sings a sad song, but a humane one nonetheless (by far the most welcoming people I met during my trip!) No hot water? Doesn't matter. The Ursus comes in large formats for only 100 cents! And with some luck, you can glimpse at the girls dancing on the bar of Twice club, with little clothes on and no smiles! Better get used to it: woman is an object over there. Always. On the billboards, your dryer comes with a naked chick. Everywhere, Romania is awakening and looking for cues.

I'm shocked to find the People's House imagined by Ceausescu, started in 1984, but unfinished since 1989... A testimony to uselessness, mythomania at its best: a baffling affair (the second widest building in the world next to the Pentagon). In order to accommodate himself and his wife, the crook razed a large part of the city (40 000 people were relocated) in the mid-80s. Today, the Parliament uses only a tiny fragment of this marble mammoth, complete with a carpet that requires 35 people to

unfold! Mind-boggling.

It's in Transylvania, a province I deemed imaginary when I was small, that we go on with the film, suddenly stricken with flashbacks. Tiny and unimaginable villages of medieval allure. Near Curtea de Arges, the ruins of Castle Poienari lead us straight to the memory of Vlad Tepes, the bloodthirsty warrior who inspired Stoker to create the character of Dracula. Tourists are nowhere to be seen. A gloomy mountain and... 2000 stairs to climb toward this castle, where Vlad the Impaler lived for the longest period before being defeated by the Ottomans. The Carpathians, the breathtaking but treacherous Transfagaras road, Brasov, Sibiu, Sighisoara, then Timisoara in the province of Banat... The credits roll on a fascinating country. From end to end.

We leave the Latin world for the heart of the Balkans, vivified by true modernity, yet weakened by recent conflicts. Belgrade is a black comedy. The capital is burdened by shame, as we'd been told. The Serbs would sell their mothers to join the European Union ASAP. The merger is coming, no doubt. Land of basketball champs (those Serbs are frickin' tall!), Belgrade screams of tranquil debauchery, with its stunning women, perfectly at ease in a society fraught with disturbing sexual stereotypes. All the while, the Serbian male flaunts his tracksuit, perfectly virile, straight out of Kusturica's "pit bull terrier" caricature... which isn't very popular in Belgrade, confirms pretty Ivana as she dries her perfectly pink, two-inches-long nails. Two, three, even four drinks later on the Danube, in the shadow of the Kalemagdan citadel, trying to understand why the Croats, Serbs and Bosnians hate each other so much, why Vojvodina is so shocked and why nobody wants anything to do with Kosovo. Black comedies draw awkward laughter.

What does Bulgaria has in store, the last European rampart before Turkey, where men are back to a normal height and girls shed their blonde roots? Sofia is very chic at the feet of Mount Vitosha, set to become the next cool, must-see capital. Bulgaria is a comedy of manners, perfectly pleasant in its star system and its uniquely kitsch pop-folk singers, laid-back and even cute, despite the perceived presence of Europe's financial sharks, developing their shady plots (again, with triumphant hypersexualization and all these grotesque women-objects and their obscure sugar daddies). You just have to be crafty with the inflexible and omnipresent Cyrillic alphabet and Bulgaria will seem nice and pretty. Beaches even awaited us in Vama, on the Black Sea... Only half a gram of soft sand and we'd forgotten everything about economical gloom, a troubled past and the supre-

macy of tobacco on all fronts. We coughed for the entirety of our three lovely films.

THE END

After six years, my lap dance for the cinema section of *ICI* has come to an end. The credits roll with all the names of those I want to thank, industry people with whom I shared a beautiful complicity or a legendary dispute (money-grubbing producers and distributors, mind-numbing Hollywood and arguably talented filmmakers whom I might have hurt: I'm writing off your debt). And to you most of all, regular or occasional readers of mine, I thank you. You are the audience and I'm about to join you. Save me a seat up front and to the left. I'm sneaking in.

Afterword

BY ALICE MICHAUD-LAPOINTE

In the world of film criticism, there are texts with wildly different purposes. There are those that aim to flatter or to praise mediocre films with readily available funding, those that serve to leisurely relay the work of self-serving press agents. There are those meant to buy peace or to ‘appease’ tensions within the industry, texts whose ideas are muffled by restrictive word counts or the increasingly limited availability of editorial space, texts that are more or less bothered to delve beyond mainstream and received ideas, as if there was a single, homogeneous and rigid way to approach film history and to address its patrimonial value. Thankfully, of course, there are also texts that unfold, analyze and seek to find the right words to define the horizons, desires, inexpressible presences and subconscious memories that films conceal. Texts with the intimate awareness that criticism, if it stems from a generous, supportive, truly invested and assumed gesture, provides new light on film works, drawing on golden strands to expand the public discussion that they harbor in their midst.

Dissident, minority voices of film criticism resonate for a long time, even when we attempt to silence them, to denounce them as annoying, bitter, raging, cynical, mistaken or overly ‘frustrated.’ Denis Côté’s undoubtedly belongs to those voices that rocked the film criticism scene, that truly ‘shook’ it in order to democratize a type of speech that addresses cinema as a free art, far from anti-intellectual anxiety, making it a point to discuss it as such and with poise. Denis Côté writes in this way from 1999 to 2005 for the late weekly *ICI* and his articles (in excess of 990!), testaments to his keen knowledge of cinema and the workings of its industry, follow the careers of film authors such as Robert Bresson, Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont, Béla Tarr and Takashi Miike. As he mentioned elsewhere, critical activity entered Denis Côté’s life ‘fortuitously,’ almost accidentally. It grew through the greater, more striking desire to direct feature films.

The shadow of the blooming filmmaker can be felt behind the critic's quill, but without disserving it at all, Côté using his technical know-how and his keen, attentive gaze to describe the visual and aesthetic language of those films that ignite his passion in order to convey their aim. Denis Côté, whether he admires or loathes, scratches the visible, manifest surface; he strives to find the appropriate vocabulary for each film and 'unveil' the sense inherent to its images, sounds, framings and editing by addressing directorial choices and both the sociocultural and economical contexts from which the films stem. This 'accidental' critical vocation is impressive in that regard because, despite a certain amusement and care dedicated to his writing style and witz, the author exercises a rare, ferocious diligence and commitment (within the precarious and volatile world of film criticism). Throughout the years, Côté seems to embrace and abandon himself to this peculiar way of writing and to realize the full extent of the void to fill within the landscape of Québécois culture (a void, which simultaneously animates and ignites his prose). Denis Côté invites us not merely to chat about films or to mention what's deserving of one or four stars, he almost doesn't care. What matters is to talk about cinema as a medium with the power of invention and evocation, to follow impulses, lyrical flights in order to better confront — in the sense of "bringing together" — the creative gesture of another so as to better evaluate its content.

Denis Côté confronts to enlighten; he sheds light on what he considers honorable and what inspires cowardice, and this confrontational tactic surely didn't please everyone. Let us mention a memorable example: when Denis Côté harshly criticized the commercial logic behind the shameless over-promotion of *Nouvelle-France* (2004), he paid the price by being barred from press screenings by distributor Christal Films. His response? To write a critical text on the subject, framing this exclusion alongside similar events happening in France and Quebec. If Denis Côté links Luc Besson and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's antics to the reactions of Quebec's skittish and spiteful producers and distributors, it is not merely for comparison's sake but to reveal the sickly, predictable nature of the film industry's global ecosystem on both sides of the Atlantic. In a text like "Choking on My Chocolate Croissant," Denis Côté transforms his indignation into a socio-political interrogation and uses his concern as an inspiration for his writing. It is through such knowledgeable counterattacks, daring not only to address the surrounding malaise but to showcase its clownish and ridiculous character, that Denis Côté managed to show just how much "running away

with the ball” can be an essential critical exercise that allows to shift perspectives and to foster better collective aspirations.

The most memorable aspect of Denis Côté’s texts, the one that stays with me ever since I discovered them is the art of composition, amusing and frank like an uppercut, but also their unwavering intransigence, which conceals a genuine desire for the people of Quebec to surpass themselves, for us to start dreaming a little bit and a little bigger, together. I share this dream, I know I am not alone and I often ask myself what it means to continue writing texts about cinema. Amongst Denis Côté’s rants, his reservations and his clamored passions, we notice a clear echo to what, twenty years later, still animates film critics, but we also realize that their burden remains quite similar, whether it concerns the screening conditions on the commercial film circuit, the cult of ‘screenplay formulas’ or the public’s lack of curiosity for foreign films. I will not lament about any of this, not today, as Denis Côté’s texts transcend time in order to convey the necessity of rekindling our cinephilic passions, whatever the era, whatever the issues. Their vitality still remains, shouting for us to “Wake up”! and I believe that many of us still hear their buzz, again and in spite of everything.

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