

MONTREAL: THE MOVIE

A million miles of film and videotape have registered images of Montreal. Every inch of the city, from the old port to the farthest suburban outlands, can be viewed in numerous dramatic features and documentaries. The docs cover Montreal's parks, prisons, churches, delicatessens, nationalists, immigrants, hipsters, children, poets, whores and bums. They portray the city's sex kinks, diseases, racism, festivals. They celebrate its history, geography, climate, and last but not least, those winding exterior staircases that are a semi-official symbol of the city's vaunted charm.

Many foreign pictures were shot in Montreal. For a TV production, rue St. Paul appeared as Prague with the camera pointing in one direction, as Leningrad in another. Rue Ste. Catherine, near Atwater, doubled as Times Square in *Street Smart* (1987); the Jacques Cartier Bridge was the Brooklyn Bridge in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984); and Ben's Delicatessen recently passed as a deli near Coney Island in Paul Mazursky's *Enemies—A Love Story* (1989). Naturally, the city has made countless appearances as the generic, anonymous "Anytown" of countless embarrassing flicks.

As for Canadian-made features, Montreal has been—among other incarnations—the whimsical mindscape of a snow plow operator in Gilles Carle's *La Vie Heureuse de Léopold Z* (1965); the bustling world of post World War II Jewish immigrants in Ted Kotcheff's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974); the sex and drug scene of bi-sexual hipsters in Frank Vitale's *Montreal Main* (1974); the hellishly sterile mallscape of David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1980); the poverty-stricken slum of Claude Fournier's *Bonheur d'occasion* (1982); the sexy glow of Jacques Benoit's *How To Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired* (1989).

Unfortunately, during the late seventies and eighties, Movie Montreal, like Movie Paris, London, and New York, began to turn increasingly into a city constructed of clichés.

The long shot of the cross on the mountain. The camera tracking past exterior staircases curving up to the third floor of buildings that don't seem to belong on this McContinent. Cut to interiors with gleaming hardwood floors, plants, artsy *thatchkas*—a setting where attractively rumped, casually chic actors play characters, who even if they're doing quite nicely, are discontented and vaguely unhappy.

Fortunately, some moviemakers have sidestepped the clichés and portrayed Montreal in

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vivid, startling ways. A few films even accomplish one of the rarest tricks in cinema: foregrounding a city so that it becomes a dramatic presence, a character, rather than a vague shadow of itself.

For instance, Marc-André Forcier's *Au clair de la lune* (1982) evokes a working class neighbourhood as violent and deprived, but possessed by a drunken, bleary romanticism. One of the film's key shots angles in on a bowling alley parking lot, where a battered green Chevie, home to the film's protagonists, lies half-buried in snowbanks under falling snow and the pale beam of a streetlamp.

In Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Un zoo la nuit* (1987), Montreal hums ominously outside old, north end factories or lofts on the waterfront. Francis Mankiewicz's TV movie, *And Then You Die* (1987), never goes near Outremont or the *plateau*, preferring instead the funky sleaze of motels and garages on the west end of boulevard St. Jacques.

The film that captures the city's quintessence is Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal* (1989). The geographical co-ordinates of this lustrous picture are the downtown world of slick corruption, contrasted with the airy spaces of Mount Royal. For much of the film, you are above the city, and as Arcand hilariously ridicules the rapaciousness, mendacity, and pretensions of Montreal's privileged strata, he simultaneously portrays the city as a beautiful place holding mysteries.

Three recent projects also aim at avoiding, or toying with, the clichés found in Montreal movies.

Shot during the winter, spring, and summer of the past year, the just-released *Montréal vu par*, is that rare breed of film, a compilation of urban short stories. The movie has its precedents in *Paris vu Par* (1965), in which New Wave directors like Claude Chabrol told droll stories highlighting various *quartiers* of the city, and the more recent *New York Stories* (1989).

Denise Robert, the lively producer of *Montréal vu par*, grew up in Ottawa, where as a high school kid, she loved piling into a car with her buddies and trucking east on the 417. "I really felt alive each time I came to Montreal," she smiles, "all excited, ready to club."

Robert's youthful attraction to Fun City might have been an underlying motive, when a few years ago, she came up with the idea of a feature length compilation of Montreal stories, each shot by a

different director and to be released in time for the 350th anniversary of the founding of the city. (The movie will, in fact, officially represent Montreal during its birthday year.)

"After seeing *Paris vu par* and *New York Stories*," recalls the producer, "I and my partner Michel Houle thought we could try to find a way to develop the concept in a different way." With some trepidation, they approached four busy Quebec moviemakers: Denys Arcand, Michel Brault, Jacques Leduc, and Léa Pool.

Happily, all four directors said they would love shooting a *court métrage* (one of the most intriguing but neglected forms in cinema). After signing them on, Robert thought of contacting some European, maybe French, directors to fill out the slate, and negotiating an overseas co-production deal (a common avenue to completing the financing of a Quebec movie). Instead, she found two more directors—and a deal—in Toronto.

Denise Robert is proud of the fact that *Vu par* is the "first official co-production between Ontario and Quebec. It was a tremendous amount of work," she says, "trying to get it together within a reasonable amount of time. It involved interesting the politicians, as well as the SDGIC (Société générale des industries culturelles) and the OFDC (Ontario Film Development Corporation)." The project raises the question, smiles the producer, "Can Quebec and Ontario have *cultural relations*?"

The two moviemakers Robert contacted in Toronto were Patricia Rozema and Atom Egoyan, both hot since they attained bright-hope-of-Canadian-cinema status during the late eighties. Rozema made her breakthrough at the 1987 Cannes film Festival with *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, Egoyan at Cannes '88 with his *Family Viewing*. More recently, he released the elegant, menacing *Speaking Parts* (1989) and *The Adjuster* (1991); Rozema a pulsing urban fairy-tale called *White Room* (1991).

Once the Torontonians were on Robert's team (with Ontario's Atlantis Films and the NFB signed on as co-producers), she sparked the project by giving "each of the directors one word, 'Montreal.'" They then had total freedom to work on their personal vision. I didn't want to influence them in any way whatsoever."

Three of the moviemakers—Pool, Rozema, Egoyan—wrote their own scripts. Others, like Denys Arcand, collaborated. Although they took off in strikingly different directions, "each film," says Robert, "makes a comment about the city, or translates a feeling about it into a short story." To ensure there were "no repeats of the same idea, each director became aware of the others' approaches" at story meetings Robert called.

Completing a movie with six different directors, crews, and casts (from Montreal and Toronto) was a technical coup with no precedent in the history of Canadian cinema. During the last few weeks of the summer filming, Robert was mentally juggling problems concerning Leduc's shoot, Pool's imminent one, Rozema's picture editing, Egoyan's choice of locations (he was about to start work-

ing), and a screening of Arcand's almost completed film. "They're all in my mind," she told me. "And I feel lucky to have a chance to see them work and share their vision."

Sunday, 5 a.m. The sun is about to rise, but street lamps and lights in office building windows still beam a spectral glow onto the city's empty streets.

Suddenly, an ambulance screams along a boulevard near old Montreal. In it, a dying woman stares up at the buildings overhead as they slide into images from her ebbing life.

This is the opening scene of Léa Pool's view of Montreal, a story the director calls *Sursis* (*Reprieve*). Most of the short film, explains its director, was shot "from the low-angle point-of-view of the woman in an ambulance, as if there weren't sides or a roof. You watch the city with the sensation your head is floating in the air."

As the movie speeds forward, following the "trajectory of the ambulance to the hospital," it also traces "the trajectories of a life and of a city." Pool filmed mainly between rue de la Commune and avenue des Pins, the Jacques Cartier Bridge and Atwater—in other words, "the parameters of Montreal *centre ville* on a map. I'm not going at all into the *quartiers* that show the 'Montreal' side of the city: the staircases, the alleys. This is a film about the heart of a big city."

For Pool, Montreal—at heart—is rapidly becoming indistinguishable from any other metropolis. Although she acknowledges and "loves the city's multiculturalism—you can walk from one *quartier* to another, and there are Berber restaurants, Portuguese restaurants; Greeks, Italians, Chinese"—she intends *Sursis* to project "a vision of the city in a state of emergency." Montreal as no different from Glasgow or Detroit.

Sursis is not the first Léa Pool movie to highlight Montreal. In *La femme de l'Hôtel* (1987) and *A corps perdu* (1988), the feature films that gave Pool her reputation, she visualized the city as an imposing, sometimes ominous, presence.

The director, who emigrated from Lausanne in 1975, says that she "discovered architecture in Montreal. If I made films in Switzerland, I'm not sure I would have this interest. I find that the most unique aspect of Montreal," she continues, "is that it's a city endlessly in the process of tearing itself down or building itself up. There are holes and scaffolding everywhere. That's what hits me the strongest. Whenever you cross the street, half of it is being worked on."

While *Sursis* portrays Montreal's unsettling present, Jacques Leduc's "vue" on the city, *Les hivers sont longs*, looks into the past. Leduc (his *Trois pommes à côté du sommeil* won a prize as best Quebec film of 1989) uses rear screen projection techniques to tell the story of a painting—a portrait of Montreal's first mayor, Jacques Viger—and what happens to it over time. Leduc's film conveys Montreal as history: unchanging, yet constantly mutating.

Another of the short films, *Les Canadiens de Montréal*, plays itself out in the city's most famous landmark, the Forum. With a hockey game in

progress, director Michel Brault (*Les Ordres, Les noces de papier*) ironically swings his camera up into the stands, where a feuding couple ignores the action on the ice and engages in their own form of competition, the passion game.

Denys Arcand's response to the *Vu par* project was typically perverse. Not only did he shoot *Montréal d'ailleurs* (*View from Elsewhere*) in Toronto and a suburb of Oshawa, the film is set in a vaguely Central American city. At a residence belonging to the Quebec delegation, a group of non-Quebecers sits around spouting every possible cliché about Montreal. Eventually, their reverie is shattered by an old lady who had the greatest love affair of her life in the city thirty years earlier, and Arcand's film pirouettes in an unexpected direction.

In addition to directing *Montréal d'ailleurs*, Arcand appears in Patricia Rozema's contribution to *Montréal vu par, Desperanto* or *Let Sleeping Girls Lie*.

Rozema's satirical comedy visits the city with the writer-director's favourite Torontonians actress, Sheila McCarthy of *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. Desperately seeking an earth-shaking experience in the Montreal of her fantasies, McCarthy's character travels to the city alone, gets snagged in language webs, and says Rozema, "spends a lot of time in the hotel, looking at *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, which reflects her idea of what Quebec is."

Desperanto's heroine eventually crashes an ultrasophisticated party, where Arcand, Robert Lepage, Charlotte Laurier, Geneviève Rioux, and various other local media lights sparkle. At the climax of the sequence, McCarthy "walks around with a big red stain on the back of a white dress," unaware of it until "she's in a very intimate moment with someone she's hoping to become close to."

"My film," the director says gleefully, "re-enforces all the stereotypes. I have a Torontonian looking like an absolute goon. Montrealers who have seen the film said that I've captured their dismissal of people" who just don't have the right style.

Rozema intends *Desperanto* to form an impression of the city as "the other." I put myself and my audience in a situation of not understanding, of not being able to get beyond the most superficial barriers."

Although she feels more sure of her French than she once did, Rozema says, "My major experience of the city is that it's a wall of language. But there's a real pleasure being around people who like themselves. In English Canada, you have to make witty, disparaging remarks about everything that comes from English Canada, or you don't belong."

Rozema has registered other sensations—like the impression that Montreal's atmosphere sometimes turns exhilaratingly dangerous: "I'm gonna sound like Anne Stewart (her character in *Desperanto*), but you see a lot of people you'd like to meet at a party really late at night—people who could probably tell you some great stories from worlds that you'd never, as a white middle class girl, get into. You can see from this perspective how Toronto looks antiseptic, tight-assed, and lacking in vibrant spots." Also lacking in festivals, whereas in Montreal, Rozema laughs, "they are everywhere.

About anything!"

Patricia Rozema's fellow Torontonian, Atom Egoyan, filmed his view of Montreal during the city's biggest festival, the one devoted to jazz. In his *Passing Through*, Egoyan—like Rozema—looks at the city from the point of view of a tourist who gets more than he bargained for.

On a warm afternoon in late June, I watched the director (he's an Egyptian-born Armenian-Canadian) working one of his locations: a sidewalk café facing Carré St. Louis. Compact in a T-shirt and shorts, Egoyan studied his set-ups beside the camera dolly.

Egoyan's companion, actress Arsinée Khanjian (she's a recurring icon in his films), sat at a café table, eating a very green salad. Khanjian's asymmetrical features co-mingled sensuality and dreamy detachment. Her black ringlets collided appealingly with her bright red lipstick and dress.

Continually checking light and composition in the camera's viewfinder, Egoyan called for take after take. In slow motion gestures, Khanjian raised her fork to her mouth, gazed into the distance, and then in one shot, carefully removed an elbow-length fishnet glove. Behind his sunglasses, Egoyan was expressionless, except for the wriggling thumb and fingers of one raised hand. He seemed to be using sign language to direct the slow unpeeling of Khanjian's arm.

In the film, she plays an enigmatic character who drifts into the consciousness of a Torontonian (Maury Chakin) attending a pictogram convention in Montreal. Deciding to sightsee, the tourist rents a museum-style cassette guide to the city, and with headphones clamped on his head, lumbers toward the east end.

Strangely, the female voice on the tape reminds him of a lover's voice from his past (Egoyan and Khanjian first met in Montreal), or maybe his future. Imperceptibly, the tourist crosses over into a mysterious territory, hoping the signs and signals along the way will guide him through it.

Near the end of Egoyan's Montreal stint, he directed a shot of Khanjian walking past an array of tourist pictograms at the crest of St. Catherine street near Bleury, then continuing toward the jazz festival bandstands a few blocks below. The camera filmed, Egoyan said "cut," but according to *Vu par* producer Denise Robert, Khanjian didn't hear him and silently drifted toward the thousands of bobbing heads in the distance.

Montreal Vu par's two English speaking protagonists are both visitors from another city—Toronto. None of the six sketches explores the English-speaking Montrealer's experience of the city.

In 1992, however, a CBC documentary will portray Montreal through Anglo eyes. Filmmakers Abbey Neidik and Irene Angelico are currently shooting the one hour *Between the Solitudes*, which according to Neidik, tracks *Gazette* columnist Josh Freed's "quest to see if there's a future for Anglos in the new Quebec."

The film, notes Angelico (she's producing, Neidik is directing) kicks off with "Josh's closest childhood friend leaving the city," a sad departure

that makes Freed, "like so many of us, think about whether he will be here in five or ten years."

In *Between the Solitudes*, Freed will traverse Montreal, registering impressions, encountering fellow Anglos. However, in this film, you won't see that standby of so much Canadian TV reportage on English Quebec—the suburban car dealer out on his back deck with a Molson and a deep grudge, muttering threats about the West Island separating from a sovereign Quebec.

The moviemakers emphasize that Freed will stand in for those they call "the Anglos who really love Quebec." These are the "bi-lingual, bi-cultural" people who read *La Presse*, watch French TV, and hang out in *Fûtenbulle* drinking *St. Ambroise* while pondering Gilles Maheu's or Marie Chouinard's latest theatrical excursions into primal emotion.

These are the Montrealers who, even if they grew up in Hamilton or Vancouver, feel at home in their adopted city. Angelico (originally a Chicagoan) speaks enthusiastically about "that something in Montreal streets, the buzz that makes you alive."

To express Montreal's lively seductiveness, *Solitudes* will, says Montreal-born director Neidik, aim at "a personal style"—perhaps "a diary form" accenting Josh Freed's voice over narration. This approach will, of course, deploy Freed's often very funny perceptions of Montreal quirks like the eccentric traffic patterns and suicidal bicyclists, the festivals celebrating everything from garden elves to fresh smelts.

Neidik wants his film to "create a sense that the city is always there behind any particular scene," and continually shifting moods. "We'll try to construct sequences, where there are little pockets of silence. For example, around magic hour, you get the feeling the forces of nature are balanced. It's a beautiful city."

The Montreal of *Solitudes* will be a warm, convivial, somewhat mystical place seen from the viewpoint of people who fear they might not belong in it. The film will explore the confusion, alienation, and growing exasperation of Anglos who, one minute, are sitting down for a comfortable schmooz with Suzanne and Jean-Marc, and a half hour later, making plans to sell the co-op flat on rue Hutchinson and hit the road.

The emotional oscillations, the uneasy feeling of being engaged in what Angelico calls a "war of survival" breeds an anger that sprang out into the open during the latest burst of Quebec nationalism. She points out that "until recently, our community has never voiced its legitimate gripes." For instance, the cavalier way Quebec funding agencies ignore Anglo filmmakers like her and Neidik, or give them minuscule token grants.

Angelico continues, "Montreal is riding on its well-deserved reputation of being the most cosmopolitan city in North America," but this reputation is "in jeopardy." Adds Neidik, "The greatness of the city is its ethnic collage. And yet, you have a force that wants to dilute it."

Between the Solitudes will trace the contours of the collage, revealing the diversity of

Montrealers. Freed will bump into people ranging from Québécois journalists to Jewish golden-agers. Ultimately, concludes Neidik, he wants his picture to be "a story about accepting the other," set in "a city whose fate isn't completely decided yet."

The viewpoint of the "other" is the focus of another movie Irene Angelico is now filming, this one as director. Her *City of Hope* will air on Radio Canada in a series of five half hours made by Montreal immigrant filmmakers like Peruvian Carlos Ferrand, whose TV films *Cuervo* and *Voodoo Taxi* picked up respectful reviews.

Angelico describes the series, entitled *Cinq Regards sur Montreal*, and produced by Cécile Gédéon-Kandalaft, as "impressionistic films, emphasizing mood and movement" as they evoke immigrant perceptions of the city. Angelico's film tracks the most delicate subject in the package: people who would face prison or death if they ever returned home.

She says that the exiles in her film "came into my life in natural ways." Tiuri, a Brazilian Indian rights activist, happened to move in with a friend next door. Hua, a Chinese anti-government protestor, met another friend two days after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Other characters include "one of the African Sunday drummers on the mountain and a flamboyant Haitian performance artist."

Through synthesis "of film and video, colour and black and white still photography," Angelico plans to invoke many reactions to Montreal in her short film—even disorientation and disgust. "These exiles are at various stages of knowing the city," she says. "In fact, some are very isolated, alienated still."

To link the several points-of-view, Angelico intends to thread her own story as a refugee into the film. "My parents got married by candlelight under bombs dropping over Warsaw," she says, and goes on to talk about the newlyweds' captivity in separate concentration camps, their liberation, and—after her birth—emigration to the U.S.A. At the height of the Viet Nam War, Angelico came to Montreal from the states with her then husband, a student "convicted as a felon" for resisting the draft. She will re-create her first sighting of Montreal in the film.

"I hated the city," Angelico smiles ironically. "We came up St. Lawrence past the strippers and the motorcycle gangs, the chickens hanging from their heads, and salamis, and bargain basement coats. I thought it was hideous—cold, ugly, commercial, and horrible. We had some friends here, and they had a loft on The Main above Duluth in an old boxing gym. There were just a couple of mattresses in there with sweat on the wall, and this big punching bag hanging in the middle."

Angelico's film will begin and end on The Main as it moves from the exile's shock and dismay to her sense of feeling at home. "I now live two blocks from those streets I hated," smiles Angelico. "I go there, and I love it. That's where the immigrants start their dream."

City of dreams and private messages, outsiders and insiders, success stories and outlaws, Fun City, and City on the Brink of Disaster. Catch Movie Montreal in theatres and on the tube in 1992. □