

ON FRANK VITALE'S MONTREAL MAIN

By John Greyson

Curatorial essay by John Greyson to accompany The Cinema Lounge screening of Frank Vitale's Montreal Main on October 25, 2009.

Montreal Main, hereafter referred to as M&M, is many things: a museum of Anglo Montreal bohemian manners; an extended commercial for Swartzes Deli; a love-letter to the loft-dwellers of St. Laurent's schmata stroll; a catalogue of latter-day neo-realist indie cinema techniques and clichés; a time capsule of early seventies hair styles; a love triangle between two 27- year old straight guys and a 12-year old boy named Johnny. M&M is many things – but first, some things that it is not.

M&M is not *Easy Rider* (released that same year, in 1974): Instead of throbbing choppers, there is a battery-impaired VW van. Instead of butch existential Dennis Hopper, there is fey talkaholic Stephen Lack. The two films share the narcissism that typifies many collectively produced buddy movies: scripts written and improvised by the actors, who together shared the credits; meandering plots that are as keen to explore the rabbit holes as they are to stick to the main road; directors (Dennis Hopper, Frank Vitale), both confident enough and self-indulgent enough to cast themselves as their own stars. M&M's central team of Vitale/Moyle/Lack may share the boys-will-be-boys hubristic drive to 'make a movie' at any cost that binds them to Fonda/Hopper/Nicholson, but the result is odder, sweeter, kinder... and memorably more anti-climactic. M&M is not an Abercrombie & Fitch/Larry Clark/Bruce Weber fantasy, trafficking in acres of tanned adolescent flesh in order to sell us acres of plaid adolescent boxers. Clark, Weber and Abercrombie all may variously oppose the moralistic 'save our kids' hysteria that permeates mainstream western culture, but in their varied efforts to display the 'reality' of teen sexuality, they can fall all too easily into a predictable and pretentious voyeurism that seems to 'pimp our kids' as a coy alternative. Despite the best efforts of Harmony Korine, Clark can't seem to help himself or his camera from the disappointing limits of reductive scopophilia.

M&M is not *Les ordres*, Michel Brault's great verite melodrama, also from 1974. Montreal was in the full-throttle grip of its own Quebecois nouvelle vague, with features by Arcand, Lefebvre, Groulx and Heroux being produced inside and outside the NFB's venerable head office. The stories they told, in the me-generation aftermath of the FLQ crisis and Expo 68, were equal parts social critique and domestic commentary, and like M&M, these often embraced the low-budget doc-inspired verities of available light, handheld camera work, improvisational naturalism, and an inspiring disregard for location permits. *Les ordres* features an ensemble of characters drawn from life and rigorously engaged in their political moment, whereas M&M just as rigorously refuses to reference political struggles of any description that were then playing out on Montreal's streets: fights around language laws,

the anti-poverty activism of the time, native and immigrant rights, or the early efforts of a fledgling gay rights movement. Instead, M&M's hints at the social and the engaged are fleeting glimpses, scraps and gestures, not full-blown narrative engagements.

M&M is not the South Park episode where Cartman is counseled by his shrink to join NAMBLA – the North American Marlon Brando Look- Alike Association. Cartman gets his acronyms confused and instead hooks up with NAMBLA, the North American Man Boy Love Association. Much deliciously tasteless mayhem ensues, with the Brando-lookalikes eventually teaming up with the FBI to raid the annual boylovers banquet, where an oblivious Cartman is guest of honour. M&M was shot in 1972, 5 years before Anita Bryant launched her 'Save Our Children' campaign, 7 years before Toronto's radical Gay Liberation newspaper *The Body Politic* was busted on trumped up charges of distributing child pornography (it took 3 trials to get the case dismissed), 9 years before North America's gay movement was gripped by rabid NAMBLA-baiting, with the Christian right inventing kiddie porn scandals and child sex rings, which would convulse opportunistic police departments and tabloid newspaper headlines for decades to come. M&M was made in a post-sixties bubble of semi-innocent uncertainty, where both children and adults had rejected rigid fifties definitions of youth sexuality and embraced the concepts of children's rights, along with civil, women's and gay rights, but still had no definitive language for what this might mean.

M&M is not *Il était une fois dans l'est*, (Once Upon a Time in the East), a big-budget queer Quebec epic (also 1974), with a script by Michel Tremblay and directed by theatre legend Andre Brassard. This ambitious ensemble work by two of Quebec's most celebrated queer artists focuses on the francophone drag sub-culture of St. Catherine and the Cleopatra, where Tremblay's play *Hosanna* was set. A prestige project that debuted at the Cannes Festival, it built on the extraordinary tradition of Quebecois queer cinema launched by Claude Jutra's precocious 1964 *À tout prendre*, and anticipated the many dazzling Francophone queer features that were to follow: *Being at Home with Claude*, *The Orphan Muses*, *Crazy*, and this year's *I Killed My Mother*. Montreal Main was another beast altogether, bemused and seemingly out on its own idiosyncratic limb, made by two bi-curious Anglo best friends, their noses pressed to the glass of Montreal's gay 'demi-monde', content to steam the glass but not venture within.

M&M is not *Death in Venice*, Visconti's 1971 masterpiece which Frank Vitale and co-star/co-writer Alan 'Bozo' Moyle must have seen. This languid, opulent period piece is the anti-thesis of M&M's resolutely gritty neo-realism, (though *Death* displays a telling weakness for seventies signature zoom-lens shots). *Death* is perhaps the ur-text for all the varied man-teen or man-boy love efforts that were to follow, (despite the best efforts of Anita Bryant and co), many of them as low-budget and neo-realist as M&M: Artie Bressan's brave if schematic *Abuse*, about a gay photographer who falls head over heels for a boy suffering from brutal physical abuse at the hands of his parents; Keanu and River, gay-for-pay as Portland teen hustlers in Gus Van Sant's glorious *My Own Private Idaho*; *For An Unknown Soldier*, depicting the treachery affair of a Canadian soldier in World War 2 and a 14-year-old; *The*

Blossoming of Maximus Oliveros, Aureaus Solito's stunning debut about 12-year-old Manila sissy who falls for a kindly butch cop; *L.I.E.*, a study of two teen petty thieves who get involved with a menacing Long Island pedo, played majestically by Brian Cox; *Mysterious Skin*, Gregg Araki's haunting mood piece about two more teen delinquents who cope with childhood molestation traumas by confronting memories of alien abduction; Amnon Buchbinder's *Whole New Thing*, a touching comedy about a precocious queer teen and his nervous closeted teacher, played by the great Daniel Mclvor; and most recently, *Shank*, about a bunch of queer-bashing Bristol hoodlums and their relationship with another queerish high school teacher. What they share across these 35 years is an insistence on the specificity, and dignity, of their varied protagonists.

M&M is not many things, and it is many things. It is a film that was first shot completely on video as a test drive, using equipment from the Montreal co-op Videographe, with the crew for the video shoot being bigger than the crew for the eventual film. The film version was shot for \$2000 cash, investment from a friend – and then a rough-cut screening for the Canadian Film Development Corporation resulted in an extra \$17,000 to finish, mix and blow M&M up to 35mm (Vitale claims half of this was spent on the music.) It started as an autobiographical portrait of the friendship between the two main collaborators Vitale and Moyle, and then evolved into a what-if triangle involving a 12-year-old boy, with the film becoming a public site for Frank and Bozo to perform their confused sexual and emotional tensions in front of the camera.

M&M is many memorable things, and here are some of the ones to watch out for:

1. Count the number of times they say 'eh' in the film. It's a lot. Especially Stephen Lack, a queerish Jewish artist whose accent cross-Atlantically wanders from Dublin to St. Johns and back, (sometimes in the course of a single sentence) and who has gone on to a career as an acclaimed painter in New York. (Trivia: in the late-seventies, he was dating a precocious Stephen Andrews, a Toronto artist and my current partner, who has excellent gossip about him).
2. Count the number of French words spoken in the film. It's about a dozen, and 'frites' is more than half of them. M&M is utterly unselfconscious about the unbridgeable divide it portrays between the French and English cultures of 1974, two distinct worlds, with St. Laurent (the 'Main') becoming a red-lit Berlin Wall dividing English west from French east.
3. In his voice-over commentary on the newly released DVD, Vitale remains as sincerely heart-on-sleeve and as genuinely confused as the 'Frankie' he portrays is in the movie, unsure of what he thinks, feels or desires for Johnny or Bozo. Significantly, everyone in the film uses their real names, and the blur beyond dramatic invention and documentary observation purposely and continually collapses. During the making of the film, the long-

standing bromance of Frankie and Bozo seems to suffer sustained damage. Vitale went on to direct another feature, *East End Hustle*, and today makes industrials, commercials and documentaries. His evident pride in M&M remains rightly undiminished.

4. Moyle indulgently portrays himself as a self-absorbed sadistic misogynist, reveling in his eruptions of alternating fondness and nasty teasing with Frank, his girlfriend, and the others in the crowd. He went on to a significant Canadian/Hollywood career with *The Rubber Gun*, another instant classic of early seventies Montreal Anglo cinema; *Times Square*, *Pump Up the Volume*, *New Waterford Girl* and *Man in the Mirror* (The Michael Jackson biopic). We co-taught a production workshop in Ottawa together a decade ago, and he was as saucy, sharp and endearing as the Bozo he plays on screen. As an exercise, he had to block an unrehearsed scene with two actors in front of an auditorium of workshop participants. The scene was from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and while watching M&M, I found myself imagining him in the Liz Taylor role, screaming "an assistant professors salary!" in the manner of the M&M "You Scum" line. Watch for it, and think Liz – I don't think I'm wrong.

5. Johnny Sutherland was the 12-year-old deus ex machina cast to break up the bromance, and he and his parents and their NDG house all play themselves. It's a scenario that's hard to imagine today: a middle-class vaguely bohemian family, recruited by this strange bi-curious duo from the Main with a budget of \$2000, to star as themselves in a melodrama about man-boy desire. To their infinite credit, all three Sutherlands give compelling and understated performances, and Johnny is nothing short of a revelation, holding the screen with a fawn-like calm that is as mesmerizing in its own way as Bjorn Andrésen's rendition of Tazio in *Death in Venice*. Shortly afterwards, Johnny's folks split up and Johnny went to live in Europe, where he became a champion downhill skier and later, a Canadian speed bike racer. Now 49 and speaking on the DVD's commentary track, he's as guileless, sweet and unfazed today as he was in the film at age 12, when he astonished viewers with the poise of his performance.

6. Beverley Glen Copeland, M&M's composer and singer, created a score of distinctive original songs for the entire film, in the manner of Aimee Mann's (almost) solo turn as the musical voice of *Magnolia*. Copeland anticipates the velvety vocal ache and queer urgency of Joan Armatrading and Tracy Chapman, though without the breakout success that these two enjoyed. Instead, Copeland has transitioned and is now living as a man named Phynix, still recording and performing in Montreal, the voice still as mesmerizing as ever, well into his sixties. As film scholar Tom Waugh notes on the commentary track, his/her voice and musical style would have been perfect to do a cover of the standard 'Frankie and Johnny were lovers', a camp gesture that is perhaps still possible as an extra on a future DVD release.

Waugh argues that M&M remains one of the most compelling and haunting debuts in the history of Canadian cinema, a landmark of early seventies verité, a ground-breaker of global queer cinema, and a quirky, unique portrait of a more innocent time. The very inconclusiveness of the gentle ending is a telling transgression of gay 70s cinematic narrative traditions, which all too often insisted on the violent death of the queer tragic hero. Instead, M&M represents the sort of story-telling that we all need to be reminded of: questioning, nuanced, unresolved and deeply human, one where all three sides of this triangle are allowed to walk away, and to wonder.

About John Greyson:

John Greyson is a Toronto film/video artist whose shorts, features and installations include: Fig Trees (2009, Best Documentary Teddy, Berlin Film Festival; Best Canadian Feature, Inside Out Festival); Proteus (2003, Best Film, Diversity Award, Barcelona Film Festival; Best Actor, Sithenghi Film Festival); The Law of Enclosures (2000, Best Actor Genie); Lilies (1996 - Best Film Genie, Best Film at festivals in Montreal, Johannesburg, Los Angeles, San Francisco); An associate professor in film production at York University, he was awarded the Toronto Arts Award for Film/Video, 2000, and the Bell Canada Video Art Award in 2007.