

QUÉBEC GOLD
**Quelques hypothèses sur la *Prochaine vague* et sur l'état
du cinéma contemporain au Québec**
by Matthew Rankin

Curatorial essay accompanying the Québec Gold programme screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on June 18, 2008.

Québec, as everybody knows, is one of the great filmmaking civilizations of the world. Not all cultures are cinematic – India, yes, Pakistan, no; Iran, yes, Turkey, no; France yes, England no; America yes, Canada no – but Québec, yes. To me, Québec is the one of only two cinematic voices that really speaks for North America. Fifty years from now, when archeologists sift through the ruins of North America, they are more likely to unearth evidence of *Les Boys* rather than *Men with Brooms*. Comparatively speaking, Anglo-Canada just isn't cinematic.

My friend and collaborator Paul-E. Audet once remarked to me at the (recently-murdered) NSI FilmExchange that the main difference between the Anglo-Canadian and Québec film industries was that in Québec filmmakers accept that their market is small and they're at peace with that. They know they're not going to be billionaires, but they're honest about the stories they want to tell and they embrace the limitations of their audience potential. Anglo-Canadian filmmakers, on the other hand, are more likely to feel the pressure to chase the Yankee dollar.

I think Paul is right. Delusions frequently befall the Anglo-Canadian film producer: "If only I could make this film as culturally neutral as possible," he thinks to himself, "I will penetrate the USA and the whole of the English-speaking world!" This kind of thinking inevitably results in dishonest filmmaking, which even Canadians don't want to watch, never mind the USA and the English-speaking world. This is why I think that Canadian filmmakers should take a cue from their Québécois counterparts and follow the Québec example. And an excellent place to start is with Danny Lennon's Québec Gold programme.

Danny Lennon is something of a cult figure in the Québec filmmaking community. His festival of short films, *Prends ça court!*, is on-going throughout the year. Every few months there is usually a *Prends ça court!* screening somewhere in Montréal and they are inevitably sell-out blockbusters. Danny Lennon has found a real audience for short films, which as any programmer will tell you, is no easy feat. The films in these Québec Gold programmes represent the very best of the best of Danny's *Prends ça court!* screenings and we're very lucky to see them here in Winnipeg.

These films also tell us where independent cinéma in Québec is headed, what Cinémathèque programmer Dave Barber has rightly termed the Next Wave. Looking at this work, a set of fascinating thematic and formal patterns

rise to the surface. Because short films are short, it is rare to find one that can pull an emotional commitment out of you in such a short period of time. But with each one of these films, you are in for a real emotional experience.

These filmmakers show themselves to be deeply concerned with feelings of emptiness and existential anguish. Characters act out of desperation, directionlessness, and disappointment, from Maxime Giroux's lonesome drifter in *Le Rouge au sol*, to the self-destructive Claire in Alexis Fortier-Gauthier's *Après tout*, to the feverish anxiety of Sébastien Pilote's unemployed factory worker in *Dust Bowl Ha! Ha!* These films, I must clarify, are not morbidly preoccupied with misery. They do not beat their audience with cleverness, nor do they gleefully stare with ironic marvel at the wretchedness of others (the way we Winnipeg filmmakers are often inclined to do). Rather, what rises so beautifully out of these films is a very deep concern for humanity.

Once, in Toronto, I managed to offend the visionary filmmaker Simon Lavoie by suggesting he should throw some jokes into his movies. Lavoie is part of a circle of dour, brooding, primarily UQAM-trained filmmakers which includes Maxime Giroux, Mathieu-L. Denis, Guy Édoin and others, and these guys are absolute geniuses. I was only being facetious with Lavoie, but it is true that the major tendencies of the Next Wave of Québec cinema are stridently austere. Often stripped of musical accompaniment, and totally devoid of the symbolism we associate with well-known Québec masters like Jean-Claude Lauzon and Robert Lepage, these films are fixated on the organic process of drama as opposed to cinematic artifice.

There are exceptions, of course. Patrick Gazé's comic monologue *Mon nom est Victor Gazon* treats the heavy subject of suicide with both concern and humour. Alexis Fortier-Gauthier makes one of the most brilliant uses of soft focus I have ever seen and Mathieu Grondin's film *Karen Elkin: Screen Test* likewise uses artifice to rich effect, albeit within the context of a very organic, one-shot narrative. Guy Édoin's *Les Eaux mortes*, starring the great Gabriel Gascon (a walking atmosphere in and of himself!), is a film about death, but nonetheless remains one of the warmest, most up-ended films in the programme. When it premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2006, a Winnipegger of no-less renown than Chantal Kreviazuk told the *Globe & Mail* that Édoin's film was one of the most beautiful films she had ever seen. Despite these distinctions, all of these films seem to find a common thematic community with what might be loosely (and inadequately) termed the "UQAM school" of organic puritans.

Consciously or not, these films are striking an immense challenge to the auteur hegemony of Denys Arcand who, with inane and charmless attempts at satire like *L'Age des ténèbres*, has proven himself to be out of touch with the concerns of contemporary Québec. If we can think of the Next Wave as being rooted in any Québec cinematic tradition, I would say that it seems to find a real companionship with the films of Francis Mankiewicz (*Les Bons débarras*, *Le Temps d'une chasse*).

Every short in this programme was made by a filmmaker of immense talent. Many of them are presently at work on feature films and they will soon be making a radical impact on the direction of Québec cinema for years to come. This Québec Gold programme is a rare opportunity to witness the birth of a stunningly creative generation in filmmaking and Winnipeggers – a nascent filmmaking civilization in its own right – should take note.