



DESCANT VI

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Descant

Number VI

Spring 1973

Karen Mulhallen, Editor
Daniel DeMatteis, Staff

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Photographers: PENELOPE TZOUGROS, ELEANOR LAZARE, MARTHA JACKSON. ANNE WORDSWORTH. MARGARET JACKSON. SUSAN TROW

All contents © by DESCANT 1973. Publication is financed by sales (\$1.00 per copy), contributions and grants from the University of Toronto Varsity Fund, Graduate Student Union, Graduate English Department and Graduate English Association. Unsolicited manuscripts should be accompanied by s.a.s.e and posted to DESCANT c/o Graduate English, New College Rm. 2035, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario.

Claude Jutra's
Mon Oncle Antoine

Most of the critical response to Claude Jutra's recent film, *Mon Oncle Antoine* has tried to demonstrate that the film belongs within the mainstream of Canadian filmmaking. According to those promulgating this view, the film can be considered as a fictionalized documentary, which makes use of a transparent and rather insignificant narrative of an adolescent boy's sexual, moral and social awakening to "document" life in a small village in Quebec. The charm of the film, (and most people seem to agree that the film is charming) is, in this view, said to lie in the exquisitely sensitive and somewhat ironic portrait of small-town life in French Canada, that is, in the documentary aspect of the film, an aspect of filmmaking in which Canadian films have traditionally excelled.

This interpretation, it seems to me, has two very serious shortcomings: the first is that this interpretation fails to take into account the thematic significance of the locale and historical period in which the events depicted in the film take place; the second, and more serious, is that this view, since it considers the merit of the film to lie primarily in its documentary aspects, and views the narrative only as a means of binding together and extending the significance the various "tableaux" depicting life in the small village, underestimates the importance of narrative in the film! The most explicit statement of this view was made by no less a critic than Herman Weinberg who, in *Take One* (vol 3 no 3) speaks of *Mon Oncle Antoine* as though it were for the most part a documentary and says that he regrets the filmmaker's decision to graft a narrative onto the work. When the film is properly considered, I shall argue the many "tableaux" in the film can be seen to be related in a subtle and complex progression which carries forward a narrative whose significance, far from being of secondary interest in the film is rather its central focus.

The reason why the majority of critics should have failed to recognize the thematic significance of the choice of locale and historic period for the setting of the film escapes me. Jutra, certainly, is most insistent in calling to our attention the setting of the film. The film virtually opens with the statement that the events depicted in the

film are supposed to have occurred "not too long ago." Graffiti scribbled on the washroom walls serve to make even clearer the time in which the events of the film are set, for they refer to Duplessis, who governed Quebec in the forties and fifties.

The location in which the events of the film are set is equally clearly established. Again, right at the film's opening, Jutra provides the viewer with a title which informs him that the events depicted in the film occurred "In the country of Québec, in the asbestos mining area." And to keep us in mind of the fact that the film is set in this area, Jutra frequently throughout the film, uses the asbestos mine as a backdrop.

Although the significance of the choice of this locale and time for the setting of the film should be immediately recognizable to anyone with even an elementary knowledge of the history of Quebec, few commentators have remarked upon it. Between 1950-52 strikes at the asbestos mines were the centre of social ferment which developed into the so-called Quiet Revolution which led to the downfall of the corrupt and reactionary government: this setting, therefore, is associated with radical activities.

The setting, clearly established at the beginning of the film, announces then that the work is to have political implications. Directly developing upon this, the first few incidents presented provide the viewer with a depiction of the social and industrial conditions of the time, for in the first few scenes, an asbestos miner, Jos Poulin is shown being harassed by his English-speaking foreman, worrying about developing asbestosis, and enraged over the inequalities which he sees everywhere around him. Jos Poulin is so disturbed by these conditions that he is forced to leave the wife and family that he loves to take work as a lumberjack in the backwoods of Quebec, a broken man unable to live with and provide adequately for them.

In leaving his family to take work in the woods, Jos Poulin follows the course set for him by the generation of Québécois whose reaction to the social and economic oppression took the form of a futile and defeatist back-to-the-land movement. Jutra cleverly conveys the withdrawal and isolationism which characterized the movement by having the Poulin family separated geographically from the rest of the village. This separation of the family is again emphasized when the lonely and distraught Mme. Poulin phones Antoine only to find that because of a bad connection she can hardly make herself understood. The futility of this movement Jutra portrays by depicting Jos Poulin's rage as undirected and ultimately self-defeating. As he sits in the beverage room, Jos Poulin rails against every fact of life—the English, the mine, the winter, the noise, the silence. He is unable

to determine the causes of his suffering and take action specifically against those causes.

Once he has established the historical background to the narrative and revealed the oppressive economic and social conditions prevailing at the time, Jutra begins to develop the central narrative line of the film, the story of Benoit's awakening to conditions around him. This narrative development begins with the presentations of two "tableaux" depicting incidents in Benoit's life. In one "tableau" Benoit is seen assisting at a funeral, in the other acting as an altar-boy at communion.

Though on first viewing these "tableaux" may seem to be related only in the most tenuous manner, in fact, the interrelationships between the two are subtle and complex. For one thing, both "tableaux" show Benoit mocking those in authority. Throughout the mass, Benoit makes sport of the proceedings by pulling faces and carving his initials in the altar-rail. Similarly, when Fernard, after closing the casket goes in to join the wake, Benoit mocks his hypocritical solemnity by informing him that his tie is crooked. In the opening scenes of the film, then, Benoit is shown to be a youth who refuses to take seriously the hypocritical social conventions of his elders.

In both "tableaux", moreover, Benoit is exposed to the difference between what appears to be and what truly is. Thus at the funeral, when the corpse is undressed, the apparently complete tuxedo is revealed to be only a false front covering only the visible portion of the corpse. Moreover, as soon as the funeral service is completed, the sham grief of the mourners quickly evaporates only to be replaced by their enjoyment of the wake. And at the church, Benoit discovers the apparently exemplary priest secretly imbibing the sacramental wine. In these scenes, then, Benoit experiences the deceptions of the custodians of faith, virtue and power. Throughout the film the remaining "tableaux" continue to develop the two ideas set forward in these two scenes.

Many of the "tableaux" therefore, show Benoit's youthful acts of rebellion against those who hold power, and as the film progresses, these acts become increasingly more daring. Benoit's daring reaches its highest point when he and a friend toss snowballs at the boss' horse as the boss rides through the village contemptuously throwing out Christmas gifts for the workers' children.

The reaction of the adults to Benoit's youthful rebellion reveals the difference between the older generation and Benoit's generation. As Benoit and his friend (after this incident) stride boldly down the street, the older people look at him with a mixture of admiration for his courage and fear for the possible consequences of his actions.

The older generation, it is clear, have been frightened by the boss into passive acceptance of the *status quo*. It is from Benoit's generation, therefore, that the impetus for social reform must come.

The growing social awareness that leads Benoit to such acts as this is paralleled by the development of his affection for Carmen. At the beginning of the film, Benoit is shy and awkward with Carmen. Thus in the early portions of the film, he is seen peaking through a keyhole at a woman undressing and bullying Carmen. By the end of the film, Benoit's exploitive sexual assertiveness has been replaced by affection for Carmen. Hence, at the end of the film we feel Benoit unwillingness, even after all he has been through, to disturb the sleeping Carmen in order to seek her comfort; a short-lived sexual fantasy in which all the horror he has experienced is transmuted into beauty which must serve instead.

The second idea announced in the two early scenes, Benoit's recognition of the difference between what seems to be and what truly is, is also of central importance to the film and is developed in the story of the metamorphosis of Benoit's relation to Antoine. In the first half of the film, Antoine is portrayed as a figure of considerable power in the village. In one scene, Antoine's power is cleverly conveyed by contrasting the townspeople's behaviour in front of Antoine's general store with their behaviour when they are at some distance from the store. In this scene, we see the workers and school children spilling out of the factories and schools, the fathers and children meeting and joining in a wild and joyous carouse as they make their way down the street towards Antoine's store. As soon as they arrive in front of the store, the carousal ends and all the townspeople line up in row upon orderly row in front of the store. The idea is further developed by showing Antoine gloating over the way in which he controls the pleasures of the ordinary townspeople by concealing the decorated store windows until it strikes his fancy to reveal them. Antoine is even portrayed as presiding over the rituals which attend the elemental transformation of life: as undertaker he presides over the funerals in the village, and, as the proprietor of the village's only store, he is the sole source of the trappings associated with the marriage celebration.

Antoine, in the early portion of the film is portrayed not only as powerful but also as greedy and exploitive. Throughout the film, for example, he greedily hoards his liquor, not offering to share his bottle of expensive gin even with his wife. And in one scene, it is revealed that although Antoine's charge, Carman, is being cruelly exploited by her father, and that Antoine could end this exploitation by adopting her, he refuses to do so.

These two characteristics of Antoine are again portrayed, as Antoine and Benoit set out on their evening excursion to the Poulin farm. Antoine at the beginning of the excursion appears to be a man of strength and power lording cruelly over the nervous Benoit and mercilessly playing upon his fears. And when he arrives at the Poulin farmhouse, rather than offering Mme. Poulin the comfort which, in the absence of her husband she so desperately needs, Antoine proceeds to gorge himself on pork and swill his gin, leaving the corpse of the young man unattended.

Benoit does not go unaffected by Antoine's behaviour. In order to show Benoit's reaction to Antoine's behaviour, Jutra makes use of a shot from Benoit's point of view, showing Benoit's perception of Antoine as disgustingly piggish. By presenting the action from Benoit's point of view, Jutra reveals the impact which the actions have upon him.

Up to this point in the film, then, Benoit has experienced Antoine only as a strong and powerful even if callous and exploitive individual. The events of the next portion of the film, however, reveal that Antoine's strength and power are really only apparent. On the way back to the village from the Poulin farmhouse, Antoine sinks deeper and deeper into drunkenness and Benoit takes over the task of guiding Red Fly home. The coffin falls off the sleigh and Benoit is forced to solicit Antoine's assistance in loading the box back onto the sleigh. Antoine is too drunk to be of any help and, at the climax of the film, he breaks into a maudlin, self-pitying sobbing which shows that he is a weak, frightened and impotent man.

Benoit, then, on this midnight ride experiences not only the callousness and cruelty of those that hold power, but also their underlying weakness. The radical implications of this insight are clear. To show that those who hold power are evil is to demonstrate the need for but not the possibility of social change; only where the weakness of those who hold power is also revealed do we demonstrate that revolutionary action can be successful.

The story of the awakening of Benoit's insight on that Christmas is paralleled by the story of Jos Poulin's return home. In developing the two stories side by side, Jutra brings out the important contrast between them. For, whereas Jos Poulin returns home only to experience another defeat, Benoit's new insight is an insight that could pave the way to his becoming a victor. For Jos Poulin, reality was too oppressive to be overcome. Benoit, however, has seen through the weakness of those who hold power. The stage is set then for him to take revolutionary action. At the end of the film we feel that Christmas, the birthday of the Saviour, has given birth to a force

which might redeem the people of Quebec.

One can, then, I have argued, read in the narrative of *Mon Oncle Antoine* a meaning of considerable impact. Far from being, as the majority of critics have suggested, merely a means of binding the film together or of extending the significance of the document, then, the narrative, I have suggested, is the central focus of interest in the film. If *Mon Oncle Antoine* appears to some to be a documentary, the reason for this I would argue lies in the peculiar and original dramatic structure of the film. *Mon Oncle Antoine* is a film which consists of a series of seemingly disjointed "tableaux" which respect the unities of space and time, thereby imparting to the film a peculiarly realistic texture. Such a structure, it seems to me, is eminently suited both to film (which, in virtue of its photographic basis has a realistic character which abhors the tight-closed artificial dramatic structure) and to work whose intention is to awaken the audience to the social and political realities around them. But, I have argued, the documentary aspects of the work do not absorb but rather are absorbed by the narrative. To conclude from the fact that the film has a realistic texture, that the film is a documentary, albeit a fictionalized documentary, is to ignore the intricate dramatic progression in the series of "tableaux" presented to the viewer.