



I remember first seeing *La Vie rêvée* during Peter Harcourt's mind-blowing Godard retrospective at the 1980 Festival of Festivals. The film was presented as an example of the master's influence and, certainly, its subversion of narrative conventions, its staccato movement between the registers of fantasy and dream, its strategic deployment of jumpcuts, swish pans and visual and aural disjunctions, all eminently qualified *La Vie* for a place within the Godardian canon – but with a difference. That difference had to do with the film's extraordinary representation of women's friendship and its ironic deconstruction of the mass-produced oedipal fantasies which inhabit our unconscious. Here was a film, to paraphrase, that I had always dreamed about.

I subsequently met Mireille Dansereau at a Canadian Images festival and was astonished to discover that the very plucky and boisterous sensibility of *La Vie rêvée* was embodied in a very elegant and delicate woman.

Dansereau's career – which spans the range from independent filmmaking, through the National Film Board, industrial and television shorts and specials to 35mm features, teaching and motherhood – reads as a continual (and all too familiar) story of the struggle between physical and artistic survival. Her next film, in fact, currently in script development, is intended as an exploration of the creative duality and tensions confronted by the artistic mother.

Her films have never been popular. Both *La Vie* and *L'Arrache coeur* received scant distribution in Canada even while achieving much critical acclaim abroad. Always a phase apart from contemporary currents, her films have often had to wait years before they are recovered by the critical context and the audience they deserve. This may also be true of Dansereau's new feature, *Le Sourd dans la ville* which played at the Festival of Festivals. A cinematic meditation on life, death and spiritual survival, *Le Sourd* certainly remains in a class all its own.

I spoke with Mireille for a very short half-hour between screenings and the innumerable interviews in her room at the Park Plaza, during the Festival of Festivals.

Mireille Dansereau

A Phase Apart

by Brenda Longfellow

Cinema Canada: *Why don't we start with La Vie rêvée. How does that experience compare to the last two features you have worked on?*

Mireille Dansereau: Now that I look back on it, I realize how free I was. I was just doing intuitively what I felt. There was no censorship. There was just energy and a lot of feelings. There was such a small budget – something like \$80,000. We shot deferred salaries on Super-16 and so the real cost was half of that. All the actors were non-professional and the technicians were starting too. It is so different today.

Cinema Canada: *It must be difficult, to say the least, when you are making these films about such intimate subjects to maintain that feeling of intimacy. With all those people it is like you are making an industrial project and you become more like a manager of a small business.*

Mireille Dansereau: On a large feature you normally have 40 people on the crew. When you are trying to make a film with all your soul and you are surrounded by so many people who, in a way, are disturbing your vision, you have to fight instead of simply trying to put on screen what you have in your head. That

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is hard enough. I haven't made a film in so many years. Next time I want to work with a much smaller crew, I want to be consulted.

Cinema Canada: *There is such a feeling of spontaneity, such a sense of magic in La Vie rêvée, the camera always seemed to be moving and there was such a wealth of imagination on the screen. When I first saw the film about seven years ago in the context of studying Canadian film, I was thrilled. It seemed so different, with documentary characteristics but exploding in fantasy, dreams and a moving evocation of women's friendship.*

Mireille Dansereau: I had a cameraman who, when he did a shot, would finish it in a way which I could use in the editing. If we were on the street and he saw something interesting, he would play with his camera while we were rehearsing. And I played with all those things while we were editing. It was really a film made in the editing room. The other difference was that in 16mm we were hand-holding the camera, which nobody does now in 35. In those days too, you could just shoot people on the street, you wouldn't have to ask them for a permit. Now the producers are afraid they could be sued and the actors don't like to have non-professional people in the film.

Cinema Canada: *How was the film received at the time, given that it was so different from the tradition of films that were being produced in Quebec?*

Mireille Dansereau: The men in the co-operative I was working with (ACPAV) were opposed to the film; they felt that the dreams in the film were not the dreams of women. They had asked their girlfriends. I really felt they were trying to censor me. I made the film in spite of them. Any film I have done, I have done in spite of people.

After *La Vie rêvée* I felt very vulnerable. I was completely lost. I did not know if it was good or bad. In Quebec no one liked it, everyone was into political nationalism and I was out of the current. The film was much better recognized outside of Quebec. That hurt me a lot.

Cinema Canada: *Part of the problem might have been that there was very little context for the film. It was the first feature made by a woman in Quebec and long before we'd seen other kinds of feminist films from women in other countries which, like La Vie rêvée were committed to a very different aesthetic, a very different approach.*

Mireille Dansereau: I wasn't conscious of feminism when I made the film. I was surprised when it was taken over by the feminist movement.

Cinema Canada: *I think we took to the film because there were so few films around that represented women in any*

kind of positive manner and at the same time were so full of vitality and experimentation. So much of the film concerns the love and intuitive, almost unconscious, identification and empathy between two women. Their relationship to men is largely irrelevant if not a joke.

Mireille Dansereau: That was a big criticism. Where are the men? What's happening? I said, "I don't know, I'm making films about women." I still am. That's what I know best. And now children. What do you want me to talk about?

Cinema Canada: *Shortly after La Vie rêvée, you went to work at the National Film Board; what was that experience like for you?*

Mireille Dansereau: That's when I made *Je me marie, je me marie pas*. I don't know, I was never able to do what I wanted at the Film Board. Anne-Claire Poirier asked me in to do a film about marriage. I started this project as a scripted drama about the fantasies of women around marriage. I started scripting it and went to the programme committee and they criticized me. I thought they were laughing at me. I wanted so much to be accepted by Film Board people. I think Anne-Claire Poirier wanted me to do a nice ordinary documentary. I think it was less frightening for her. The Film Board never wanted me to do another drama.

I was panicky, so I put the project aside and said to myself, let's forget your fantasies and have other women express themselves. I purposely chose women who would express me, who would be a part of me. But still it was a made-for-television documentary. That was what the Film Board had asked me to do and it was a success in that it reached a lot of women. I did the job because I needed the work and needed to be integrated somewhere. I think I lost a lot.

Cinema Canada: *L'Arrache coeur, your second feature, represents a significant evolution from the free-spirited whimsy of La Vie rêvée. There seemed to be a difference not only of production values and of shooting in 35, but in the emotional tone and approach.*

Mireille Dansereau: I identified too strongly with the pain which was the subject of *L'Arrache coeur*, of that difficulty of love, of contact between mother and daughter. I didn't have enough distance to treat it. I was in a depressed mood. My life was going badly and all that goes into your films. I was alone with a child.

Cinema Canada: *Yet it's a very powerful film in many ways. I remember seeing it at a Canadian Images Festival just when it came out and I still have some very vivid memories of scenes. I always wanted to see the film again but it never was distributed in English Canada.*

Mireille Dansereau: I brought the film to Hollywood and there were screenings at Twentieth Century Fox and at Warner's. They looked at the film and said, "Oh, well-made film, great actress, who is she (Louise Marleau)? We don't know her. Very topical subject but we don't know anyone in this film so how can we promote it?" Two years or so later *Terms of Endearment* came out, a similar subject with well-known actors. As a little Québécois girl trying to make films that will reach people, deep films, with unknown actors, how do I get out of this?

Cinema Canada: *One of the similarities between L'Arrache coeur and Le Sourd dans la ville is that both films are trying to represent an interior space. In some ways it must be easier in literature where you are not forced to make things as literal as you are in film. In film we are always burdened with the image, requiring an image to have an image to support those emotions.*

Mireille Dansereau: Carl Dreyer said the task of cinema must be to make visible the invisible and that is what I am trying to do. I am searching more and more to make the inner life visible in some way. Our inner voyages, our unconscious, those glimpses of memory, how the spirit goes.

Cinema Canada: *There is a real formalism in your last two films which reminded me both of Dreyer and of Breton. The films do have much more of a European art film aesthetic to them: the languorous pace, the very studied nature of the compositions, the painterly quality of the light which is breathtaking at moments.*

Mireille Dansereau: I frame very consciously and pay a great deal of attention to the set decoration. I wanted a lot of brown in the film.

Cinema Canada: *What drew you to Le Sourd dans la ville?*

Mireille Dansereau: When Louise Carré came to me with the project, I thought, "Marie-Claire Blais - wow!" I think what drew me was Marie-Claire Blais' compassion towards the disinherited, all the suffering people. I was also attracted by that contrast between the image of the bourgeois woman who has no way of fighting in life and the poor, for whom life is much harder but who can fight.

Cinema Canada: *I was thinking about your film in relation to certain Quebec films of the '70s, Bar Salon, for example, and Tremblay's plays, which began to represent les gens de la rue, the people of the Plateau, Montreal's working poor. All of this was a political gesture. It was an act of utter defiance to show these people speaking jargon on the stage or screen. Your film seems to approach*

that territory in a very different manner that pushes the representation of these people into the space of allegory.

Mireille Dansereau: Yes, all the characters function as allegories. They are all confronted with this difficulty of living, rich and poor. Florence, the bourgeoisie, has never been to that social milieu. Why does she go there? Because she knows she will find people like her, not socially but in terms of the inner world. And it's a place that doesn't exist, a timeless place. There is nothing in the film in the costumes or anything that could tell what year you are in.

Cinema Canada: *To me it seems to be a very Catholic film about martyrdom and earthly suffering. The prescient character in the film, in fact, is named Judith Ange.*

Mireille Dansereau: The film won the Catholic award at the Venice Film Festival.

Cinema Canada: *Its implicit moral seems to be that survival, and not merely physical survival but moral survival, maintaining a certain capacity for hope is dependent upon the discovery of a kind of transcendental or spiritual value, whether it is art, or religion. We are all faced with the hardship of realizing a value outside ourselves, like Gloria and Mike who live with the dream of escaping to San Francisco. A Canadian dream if there ever was one.*

Mireille Dansereau: It's love too. The love between Gloria and Mike is so powerful it can move mountains.

The film is not only about darkness and suffering though, it is about light too. That is one thing that people never realize about Marie-Claire Blais novels: that amidst the darkness, there is hope. And each of the characters in the film finds their moment of light, their state of grace. Florence when she goes to the art gallery and Mike when he steps outside into the sunshine and can forget about his illness.

Cinema Canada: *With that kind of humanist message your film certainly is set apart from what has been hailed as the new renaissance of Quebec films, work embodied in Un Zoo, la nuit and the films of Simoneau with their urbanity and their view of the relentless harshness of life.*

Mireille Dansereau: I feel those are men's films in that the outside decor, the exterior is very important. I am all interior. My films deal with the life of the feelings. Bergman does that too and he is a man. The films of Lauzon and Simoneau are all physical - a movement through exteriors, people shooting at each other and car chases. It is not that I am against those films. I'm just not into that. I just hope I can continue to make the films the way I do and that there is a place for me.