

Jacques Leduc's
Charade chinoise

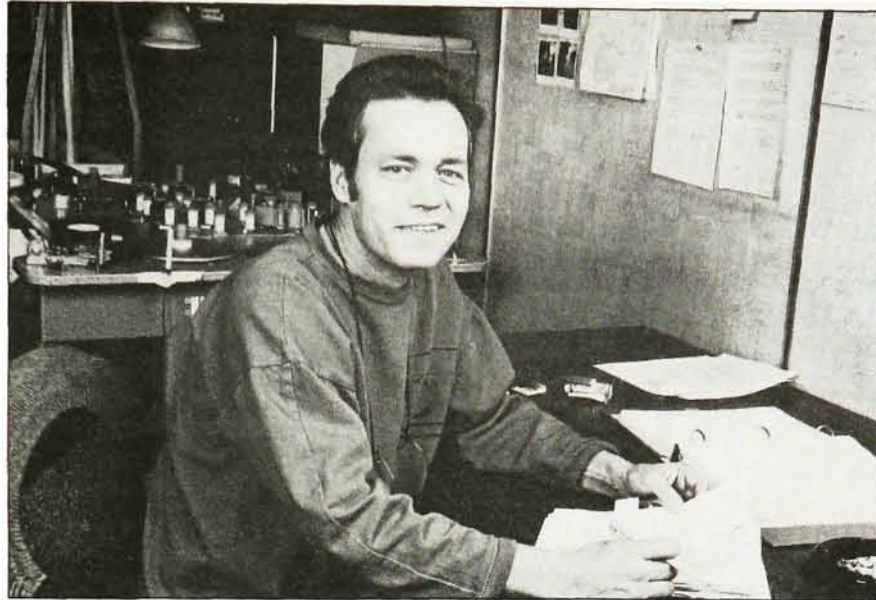
Looking back at the past always contains some traps. Reminiscence is a mode where nostalgia may overrun the necessary objective analysis of the facts, and may sometimes be a way to obscure the present.

Jacques Leduc's latest documentary feature *Charade chinoise* promotes itself as an assessment of Quebec's militancy during the '60s and the '70s. As Leduc puts it, in a voice-over commentary on his film, it tries to "strike the right hour" and to convey an "assessment of delusion." The occasion for this assessment is an organized St-Jean Baptiste's weekend in the Eastern Townships. Leduc brings together a dozen old militants, men and women who have just turned 40 and are trying to make sense of their previous commitments in the face of today's pervasive individualism.

Leduc incorporates two of his earlier films, *Notes de l'arrière-saison* and *Le Temps des cigales*, into *Charade chinoise*; they provide the focal point of the film because they embody the most precise statements about the participants' earlier commitments. The two films are screened by the participants on a Saturday morning as the rain falls. The weather is an occasion for Leduc to quote George Bernard Shaw: "Everybody's talking about the weather but nobody's doing anything about it," and to comment on current documentary film practice: "documentaries are not fashionable anymore; they imitated life and became as unpredictable as life itself."

Notes de l'arrière-saison is structured around a group of men discussing their political commitments and the concurrent provincial election which brought Robert Bourassa back to power. Providing a counterpoint to these elements, Leduc directs his attention towards Sylvie, a young student and militant in the NDP campaign. The men play down their involvement in socialist or "indépendantistes" movements by describing them in terms of utopian and illusive endorsements. They also assess the failure of communism in the world and some of them, by their very professional and institutional involvements, acknowledge the necessity of displacing the energy they put into struggling for radical reform within a "rich society" to helping Third World countries, Leduc caricatures a conception of any actual youth militancy in the use of Sylvie's character and the playing down of her commitment to the NDP electoral meeting where the greatest concern seems to be problems with a microphone.

In *Le Temps des cigales* which follows, emphasis is put on several women's portrayal of themselves as militants. Their testimonies and the assessment of their militancy are more



Conforming to nostalgia for the politics of the '70s, director Jacques Leduc

personalized than those of the men in *Notes de l'arrière-saison*. Whereas the men rely on the general and international political climate to assert their withdrawal from militancy, the women, because of the very nature of their feminist and socialist awareness, are less ill-at-ease with those commitments. This accounts for, as one of them says, "the difference between theory and practice." Ultimately, it is the difference between the men and the women as they appear in *Charade chinoise*. Countering these deeply personal portrayals is a young stock broker. Leduc makes him the antithesis of the women and their politicization in his concern with stock broking and holidays at the Club Med.

Somewhere between the two – Sylvie the NDP militant and Marc the stock broker – Leduc suggests a conception of today's youth as the conformist stratum of our society. The sympathetic and sometimes tender portrayals of the men and the women who have put their youth to serving political cause are counterbalanced by a mocking representation of today's youth. The choice of these two figures is a questionable one. It seems guided by a desire to criticize an apparent contemporary political void by investing it in stereotypic versions. In fact, between a softened socialism (Sylvie) and a rapacious capitalism (Marc), Leduc leaves us with the impression that there is no hope for true radical change and that youth is no longer the carrier of the will for change.

The discussion that follows the screening of those two films is symptomatic of this flattening-out of the present. Sylvie is astonished by the way she has been portrayed and talks of herself as seen in *Le Temps des cigales* as a "prefabricated picture of herself," as an "accessory-image to a generation." Indeed, if this is true, and if we acknowledge that Leduc contains Sylvie's astonishment, we must face Leduc's overall strategy which ultimately denigrates Sylvie's testimony. He never permits

her remarks to threaten the rampant nostalgia which pervades the film.

In fact, this nostalgia is never better illustrated than in the barbecue scene where the filmmaker has requested the participants to bring objects with them that portray their posture vis-à-vis the "question nationale." If the fetishization of Quebec's *indépendance* is made obvious by standing here in symbolic forms, it is also a pretext in which the nostalgia is foregrounded. It is evident in a discussion between one of the old militants who speaks about the FLQ (Front de libération du Québec) to the astonished young stock broker, learning about these events from the past. Once more, as a supposedly representative character of the youth, Marc ostensibly illustrates the ignorance and lack of concern of his generation. In *Charade chinoise* empowerment seems like the privileged area of a previous generation. One participant in the film states that militancy is a way "to create identities through revolt." An affirmation which Leduc seems to believe, to the point of denying the possibility of revolt in any succeeding generation. It is a strange vision of history that one gets from *Charade chinoise*, as if everything was bound within the past and never to occur again.

Charade chinoise develops its arguments through many formal devices which echo the '70s militant films. The director's voice-over becomes the unifying point of these devices, commenting as he does on documentary practice and on filmic representation. The best examples of that self-reflexive attitude are found in verbal connections continuously made between the weather conditions and the shooting conditions. We are made aware that the presentation of the two films to the participants are only possible because of the use of a generator. Once more, when the exterior barbecue scene is scattered by an electrical breakdown, Leduc has chosen to replace the missing images, those impossible-to-shoot, with

an animated sequence by Pierre Hébert which basically illustrates *le passage du temps*, the flow of time. These mechanisms of self-reflexion are integrated into the film to convey the idea Leduc assigns to a coincidental reality that is "stronger than cinema itself."

Leduc makes clear near the end of *Charade chinoise* that one of his preoccupations in making the film was "failing to change the world, how far can we go on filming?" (*A défaut de pouvoir changer le monde, jusqu'où peut-on filmer?*). He sees the failure of political causes through the participants of *Charade chinoise*, but he also makes this judgement on a filmic practice which is no longer the carrier of these political causes: "I miss this way of seeing, the way of seeing possible change."

If *Charade chinoise* incorporates some devices from '70s militant films, namely the consciousness-raising group encounter and the attitude of self-reflexiveness, it does not use them to elevate the discourse. They are – in fact the discourse itself is – infested with, and handicapped by disenchantment. The impossibility of change felt by the director; the dead-end of political causes and of a certain kind of documentary film practice, bring the film itself to a dead-end. This idea is best summarized at the very end of the film in an exchange between the director and one participant when the latter says: "[this experience] was both intimate and eccentric (*flyée*) but of no use to anyone... This is perhaps the NFB's vocation"; Leduc responds: "Perhaps."

The title, which refers to a riddle, finally becomes a pretext to the apparent and inescapable helplessness of a previously idealistic and militant generation. It is not that the topic in itself is without relevance. It is mainly the attitude of the filmmaker towards it where the predominant sentiment is one of vexation and a blasé facade is the result. It is sad to see a director like Jacques Leduc who has always shown a progressive attitude in dealing with historical subjects simply falling into a trap of conformism. It is a conformism of nostalgia which seems the dominant mood these days with the NFB's French production unit. In their apparent or seeming preoccupations with the passing of time and the loss of youth, perhaps they could use some new blood.

Alain-N. Moffat ●

CHARADE CHINOISE d. Jacques Leduc, Jean-Marc Ptotte p. Eric Michel cam. Jean-Pierre Lachapelle, Jacques Leduc, Pierre Letarte, Roger Rochat, asst. cam. François Vincelette, Nathalie Moliavko-Vizotski, Michel Bissonnette, Michel Bernier, light François Warot, sd. Richard Besse, Claude Beaugrand, Esther Auger ed. Pierre Bernier assl. d. France Dubé animation Pierre Hébert mus. René Lussier, Jean Derome, Robert Lepage, Bernard Buisson studio rec. Louis Hone mix. Hans Peter Strobl, Jean-Pierre Joutel man. Michel Dandavino admin. Joanne Gallant, Monique Lavoie l. p. Diane Jutra, Pierre Renaud, Jean-Yves Vézina, Gaétan Tremblay, Jean-Serge Baribeau, Jean-Marc Ptotte, Marc Rivet, Sylvie Roche, Lina Trudel, Micheline Toupin, Nicole Thérien p. c. National Film Board of Canada colour 16mm running time 90 min.