La Mémoire des Anges: Archival Delirium and the Politics of Memory

by Brenda Longfellow

Curatorial essay accompanying the Cinema Lounge: Brenda Longfellow on Luc Bourdon's Double Happiness *program screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on May 14, 2010*

La Mémoire des Anges is more dream than film; more an archival delirium of memory than an impartial history of a time and a place now irretrievably lost.

Composed of clips from 120 National Film Board films that had been produced between 1940 and 1967, the film is a virtuoso assemblage of image fragments set to the music of the chansonniers, acapello groups and jazz greats of the Montreal music scene. Billed as an opportunity to "revisit the past," the film functions as a virtual *flanerie* of post-war Montreal, resurrecting scenes of the industrial life of the port, the working class *quartiers* and 'red-light' districts, the cafes, the Catholic clergy and the characteristic wooden balconies strewn with laundry, children and collective life. Filmed from moving streetcars and ships, from the back of trains and helicopters soaring over the scores of outdoor hockey rinks, the film seduces viewers through a synesthesia of motion, rhythm and nostalgic affect. In the fall and winter of 2008, the film became a sensation in Montreal, winning the Grand Prix at the Festival of Nouveau Cinema, playing at a succession of packed theatres in the city for thirteen weeks and, finally, named as one of the Top Ten Canadian films of the year.

I'm completely seduced by the rhythmic beauty and exquisite nostalgia of *La Mémoire des Anges*, a love poem to a city I love; a city where I lived for four years in the 1980s, where my daughter currently lives. A city where the ambulatory pleasures of the flaneuse are abundantly rewarded by the streets, lanes and *quartiers* of boundless visual charm and architectural distinctiveness – here mediated through a profoundly cinematic orchestration of image and sound textures and elements. For people who live or have lived in the city, and the film is above all addressed to those denizens, *La Mémoire* plays a complex game of familiarity and difference. Landmarks of the city appear: the mountain, Parc Lafontaine, the cobblestones of Old Montreal, the heteroglot crowds and shops of St. Laurent and St. Catherines, all instantly recognizable but also strange as transformed through the time machine of cinema.

There is something that moves me about this film, that conjures up my parents' time much more than my own. An image in particular of women in fur coats and high heels encased in galoshes skipping across piles of slush on a busy city street, an image that recalls the particular winter attire of my mother, a fashion anachronism that conjoins with a personal cathexis of memory. Here of course is the punctum, as Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, the anomalous detail, the idiosyncratic and off centre element in a

photograph that pierces the heart via a recognition of the vulnerable embodiment and mortality of the subject depicted. For Barthes, melancholy is the predominant affective response elicited by the photographic image, particularly the black and white image. Color photography does not interest him because it blurs the sharp line of distinction between the past present of the photograph and the contemporary moment of observation. Black and white, on the other hand, graphically articulates temporal distinction and the existential otherness of historic subjects. Thus, if melancholia envelops us when viewing *La Mémoire des Anges* it is because of our knowing recognition that all this life, vivacity, love, leisure, work, and passion is no longer. Most of the subjects depicted are now, no doubt, departed from this world, transmogrified into angels if we believe the title of the film or into ghosts, or image traces. "*I read at the same time…"* writes Barthes *"This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake."*

While Barthes's reflections were exclusively focused on the photographic still, his insight concerning the emotive affect elicited by the complex temporality of an archival image, arrested between a present past and an anterior and inevitable future goes some way toward explaining our collective fascination with archival imagery. What happens when we view the images that *La Mémoire des Anges* has so skillfully resurrected from archival oblivion: a nervous child on the first day of school, lovers strolling arm in arm down a street at night, the hustle and bustle of a crowd crossing a busy intersection, neighbours digging their cars out from under a massive winter snowstorm, the faces of workers hauling cargo in the port? "*This will be and this has been."* Perhaps the moving archival image, even more than the photographic still, emphasizes the ground of a lived and finite temporality. Here is the past recalled in a temporal flow of intentionality and action, of being in the world, a world populated by historic subjects caught in the fullness of life, oblivious to the fact that sixty years hence most will be dead, surviving only as these fragments and impressions. Archival images, particularly ones that are part of contemporary memory thus bear a kind of paradoxical dialectic where the tragic obliviousness of historic subjects is measured against our knowledge of the relentless passage of time, and of the fact that we too will not survive the imperious conceit of the present that time will stand still for us.

Before one gets too essentialist about the inevitability of certain affective responses to archival imagery, however, let me suggest that there are other things that one can do with archival imagery and there are different emotional affectivities that might be triggered--outrage for example. In the work of Craig Baldwin, Palestinian artist Sobhi Al-Zobadi[i] or African American experimental filmmaker Kevin Jerome (to name only a few), the archive is raided in order to brush history against the grain but this is not the direction that *La Mémoire des Anges* takes. As distinguished from these more overtly political or avant-garde appropriations of the archive that exploit historical anachronism as a way to de-familiarize and deconstruct ideologies of gender, social conditioning, colonialism and consumerism, *La Mémoire* deploys archival footage exclusively as poetic ethnography and as a 'memory discourse' ostensibly untroubled by disruptive interrogations of the

present. But memory as we know, is never untainted by the social and political concerns. Evaporate the complex carbohydrates of a madeline on the tongue and one is plunged, not back into the totalizing immediacy of the past, but into a laborious and frequently contradictory process of secondary revision.

Why this film now? What kind of archival discursivity and politics of memory inform *La Mémoire des Anges*? As Andreas Hussyen argues, memory discourses can be as much regressive as progressive. In *Present Pasts* and *Twilight Memories*, Hussyen reflects on the surfeit of memory discourses embodied in an increasingly musealized contemporary culture. Tracing this surfeit back to the radical transformation of temporality in our lives linked to global flows, technological change and new patterns of work and consumption, Hussyen situates contemporary memory discourses as a reactive formation that ends by depoliticizing history and undermining earlier activist imaginings of the future.

I'm not at all suggesting that *La Mémoire* is necessarily allied with the more conservative tendencies of contemporary memory discourses but I do think one can pose a series of questions to the film that may problematize our first seduction and that may deepen our understanding of the archival discursivity and pleasures that the film delivers.

The Politics of the Moving Image Archive

As much as *La Mémoire* offers a historic portrait of Montreal in the immediate post war period, it also, and at the same time, narrates a history of a particular period of Quebec cinema, of its styles, its extraordinary cinematography and its contradictory evolution as a national cinema within the heart of a federal institution, the National Film Board/ Office Nationale de Film (ONF). To be sure, the singular memory indicated in the film's title is only and ever constituted via the cinema, in this case the thousands of educational, fictional, sponsored and documentary films and stock shots that make up the repository of moving images in the National Film Board archive. Every archive has its own stories and erects its own bulwarks against forgetting as Derrida reminds us in *Archive Fever.* An archive is never static, it is a living and malleable entity where meaning and historical narratives take on distinctive shapes in response to the evolving concerns of the present. Certainly one of the most transformative moments in the history of the National Film Board Archive involved the recent digitization of a substantial part of its collection. Launched with much fanfare in 2008, the NFB, a "leader in digital content "as Government Film Commissioner and NFB director Tom Perlmutter put it, and "committed to using the latest technologies to increase access to this world-class resource" launched an online stock shot library that allows "researchers, producers, directors and editors from around the world unprecedented access … giving them the ability to view, edit and share online."[ii] Equally important was the

launch in 2008 of the new online face of the NFB: NFB.ca which provides access to hundreds of NFB films that can be watched as the site cheerfully announces "online, on your personal home page or on your iphone!"

The significance of digitization of course is not only that stock shots and films from the collection are now available via the internet but that this vast archive is now embedded in a searchable database, with tags identifying content. I don't think it is a coincidence that *La Mémoire des Anges* is produced precisely at the moment when the most of the collection of the NFB is being digitized and sorted. The possibilities evoked by digitization enable a very different approach to working with archival materials and it seems to me that this is a primary source of inspiration for director Luc Bourdon and his editor Michel Giroux. In other words, I'm suggesting that the influence of the "digital" is not only confined to its being an enormous aid in organizing material and editing but that the aesthetic and constitutive structure of *La Mémoire des Anges* is inspired by the logic of the database, and by the digital aesthetics of sampling, mixing, recycling and remediating older analogue elements into fundamentally new assemblages.

As Bourdon recounts in an interview published in *Hors Champ*[iii] he and editor Michel Giroux began their process by viewing hundreds of NFB films and the NFB's extensive collection of stock shots and making detailed annotations. From this first pass, the two digitized over two hundred films in part and in whole in order to create, as Bourdon puts it "an image bank." Each of those two hundred films was then 'decomposed' into component parts and tagged according to specific topics (trains, plants, songs, etc.).[iv] In addition, they logged many hours going through 'outs' and bits of forgotten films from the personal archive of longtime NFB collaborator Don McWiliams, who had patiently amassed a collection from films that had been thrown in the garbage over the last several decades.

Bourdon compared this process to taking 200 puzzles, pulling them out of their boxes and mixing them one by one, finding new associations and connections. The primordial rule that he and Giroux set themselves was one of radical decontextualization. Every sequence in every film was to be broken down into the most basic unit of film grammar: "the shot" in order to avoid, as Bourdon insisted, "the citation effect of anthology."

In developing an assemblage of this mass of source material, Bourdon and Giroux determined that the structuring logic of the film would be neither chronological or narrative: there is no voice over narration deployed to provide context or exposition and no music used that is not drawn from original music deployed in films of the period. The logic of *La Mémoire* is, rather, poetic where sequences are built through association of themes (seasons, for example or activities like hockey) or through very particular continuities of geographic space (the port, St. Catherine's, St. Laurent). In every sequence, however, the precise singularity and original qualities of each shot are maintained. There is no effort to balance or colour correct in order to avoid a

shocking juxtaposition of film grades or of black and white with colour stock. Temporal disjunction is both recalled and elided through the juxtaposition of images that may have been filmed at dramatic intervals of several years but that are here conjoined through rhythm and continuous motion.

Isolated in the image bank, these shots would appear random and disaggregated but this is what the work of the film does: it aggregates, filters, culls, organizes, and reterritorializes 'orphan' shots, into a meaningful whole. This is perhaps one of the most original formal aspects of the film, that it so consciously foregrounds the system of montage as a process of producing meaning out of difference. From sequence to sequence, extraordinary connections and associations are made between singularities that juxtapose the sublime with the banal, the familiar with the anonymous. Footage documenting the public ritual of a visit by Queen Elizabeth or the pomp of a civic ceremony with the infamous Mayor Drapeau is interwoven with sequences detailing the routines and daily life of Montrealers. There is a democratizing impulse at work here that produces equivalencies between events and phenomena of ostensibly different orders and that allows the film to narrate history from the ground up, from the perspective of the everyday. A child on the first day of school, a woman flirting in a doorstep, young men acting up in a café, the film conjures these moments that are both universal and particular to the historic space and time of Montreal. No doubt this is one of the sources for *La Mémoir's* popularity as a social experience for contemporary Montreal audiences who are invited to relive and viscerally connect with the time of their parents and great aunts, their elders and loved ones, as if watching a home movie of their city.

In working through this massive amount of sources, Bourdon quickly decided to eliminate material shot after the end of the 1960s and to focus his portrait of Montreal on the 1950s and 1960s. His reason for this was three fold. In the first place, the more proximate historical images from the late sixties and the seventies lent themselves too easily to historic clichés (flower power, free love etc). Secondly, the fifties and sixties in Quebec were ripe for a major historiographic overhaul given the conventional version of this period as an overwhelmingly dark age, when a meek and pastoral people lived in the thrall of the authoritarian Duplessis regime and the Catholic Church. This is a generalization, as Bourdon recognizes, that is only sustained by exclusively looking at the molar or macro order of ideological, social and psychic schemas. By contrast, Bourdon and his editor practice a kind of Deleuzian historiography organized around the molecular, the divergent modes and manners of resistance that are found in the everyday.

The third and perhaps most crucial reason for focusing on cinematic heritage of the fifties and sixties was that all subsequent footage proved far less interesting formally, particularly with the introduction of video and with the deliberate anti-aesthetics of the handheld verite approach which eventually came to dominate documentary production at the Board in the latter decades.

Montreal on Film: From the Picturesque to the Familiar

Grierson had never really intended that the NFB would fully integrate the "French Fact" and films devoted to exploring La Belle Province were few and far between. In 1942 the first films produced in French at the NFB were for a series "Actualités canadiennes," a newsmagazine for theatrical release that eventually changed its name to "Les Reportages."[v] Other series produced in French included "Chants populaires", which used animation (by Norman McLaren among others) to illustrate the province's rich folklorique tradition.

Up to the mid fifties, in fact, most of the French production at the Board consisted of the translation and versioning of English productions. French directors pitching any kind of film had to struggle to defend their vision in the dominant lingua franca of NFB management: English. Despite these obstacles, French speaking directors like Pierre Petel did manage to produce films in the "Vigie"[vi] series such as *Au Parc Lafontaine* (1947), whose musical tribute to Montreal's famous park would be used and quoted extensively in *La Mémoire des Anges* fifty years later. Other films from the early postwar period that would form some of the key source material for *La Mémoire* include *Inland Seaport/ Le Port Fluvial* (1953) directed by Ronald Weyman and *Montreal by Night/ Métropole* directed by Arthur Burrows and Jean Palardy (1947).[vii] As with all of the documentaries produced at the time, these were post-dubbed and filmed in 16mm without synchronized sound. Released simultaneously with French and English voice over, both of these films evince a picturesque tourist view of Montreal ("North America's second largest port and, after Paris, the world's largest French-speaking city") where the 'bi-lingual' nature of the city is rendered as a quaint and picturesque local feature. *Montreal by Night* in fact uses the device of a young romantic couple out on the town (she's unilingual French; he's from Manitoba) who wander in carefree fashion, relishing the "pot-pourri of contrasting sights and sounds" of the city and embodying the allegedly harmonious relations between the two founding language groups.[viii] While wooden dramatic enactments in both *Montreal by Night* and *La Port Fluvial* would disqualify each for cinematic immortality, what does stand out is the consistent elegance of the location shooting, the fluid camera movements and frequent use of traveling shots, the artful compositions and the complex tonality of the black and white. The studied purposefulness and deliberate choreography of bodies and camera movements of course belongs to a tradition of documentary language that obviously predates the more spontaneous and immersive style of cinema direct, a style that is only made possible through the technological innovation of lightweight cameras and crystal synch and enabled by the social and political transformations of the subsequent decade. But what we are getting here are the first kinds of cinematic representations of urban life in Quebec and of Montreal as the metropolitan centre of a newly industrializing province.

The evolution from the picturesque to the familiar, that is, the evolution from an outsider and tourist view of Montreal to an engaged mode that profoundly acknowledges Montreal as the cultural centre of a distinct people depended, not only on technological innovation, but on the facilitation of a critical mass of Quebec talent. In 1956, the Film Board relocated from Ottawa to Montreal, a move in part motivated by the desire to escape the fallout from Cold War scandals and red baiting Ottawa politicians. Prodded by growing nationalist fervour in the province and by the Massey Report (1951) which had strongly argued that that the NFB did not serve both language groups, and, that there was a "need to give attention to producing films 'specifically for French speaking Canadians,"[ix] the NFB slowly began to expand the possibilities for French production. By 1960, the nucleus of 'l'équipe française' had been recruited: Gilles Carles, Gilles Groulx, Claude Jutra, Denys Arcand, Jacques Godbout and cinematographers Michel Brault, Guy Borremans and Guy Dufaux, all of whom would go on to indelibly shape the evolution of Quebec national cinema.

At a time when many NFB films were still 'banned' in Quebec by a provincial censor board controlled by Maurice Duplessis who remained convinced of the NFB's communism and dangerous secularism, the NFB provided a kind of haven for intellectuals fleeing from the reactionary provincialism of public culture in Quebec.

Of course all of this was changing with the onset of the Quiet Revolution. In 1960 the Duplessis regime was kicked out of power and Jean Lesage's Liberals were elected on a policy of 'rattrapage,' one that involved massive industrial development, the intervention of the state in the economy, and a modernizing secular humanism that would slowly replace the hegemony of the Catholic Church as the primary ideological formation in Quebec. Quebec filmmakers at the National Film Board played a central role in the ideological and cultural ferment of the Quiet Revolution, inaugurating a cinema of modernity that acknowledged and participated in the reformulation of Quebec identity away from a traditional Catholic, rural and pastoral version. For them, as much as for the other writers, artists and activists of the Quiet Revolution, the city of Montreal provided fertile inspiration for the exploration of new urban realities.

Many of the canonical films of the cinema direct movement (from 1960-64) turned their attention to phenomenon in Montreal that were seen as new kinds of urban social experiences. Gilles Groulx, in particular, concentrated on exploring urban sports rituals in *La Lutte* (1961), *Golden Gloves* (1961), and *Un Jeu Si Simple* (1964). Directly influenced by Roland Barthes deconstruction of wrestling as a contemporary popular mythology, Groulx explores popular sports as spectacle and urban ritual, where the focus is equally on the agglomeration and behaviour of the crowd of spectators as a kind of proto collective of the 'people.' Other films of this period that enrich the 'image bank' of *La Mémoire des Anges* included Gilles Carles's *Dimanche d'Amérique* (1961) which explored the religious parades, the rituals and street life of the large Italian population of Montreal and *Adultes avec Réserve* directed by Marc Beaudet et Jack Zolov (1962) which

focused on the population of nomads, alcoholics and street people who made the Boulevard St. Laurent their home. *Au Hasard du Temps* (1964) by Jacques Giraldeau, shot in 35mm colour, with its gorgeous traveling shots and witty montage of skyscrapers and other architectural marvels, perhaps provides the most exultatory paean to the city as a complex built environment.

Let me suggest though that there is one exceptional film from this period that I believe constitutes a kind of "ur" text for *La Mémoire des Anges* and that is *À Saint-Henri le cinq septembre* (1962). Directed by Hubert Aquin, the film was billed as a documentary experiment that marshaled eleven camera crews headed by the leading lights of l'équipe française who invaded the working class neighbourhood of Saint-Henri filming from dawn to dusk on the first day of school. It is no coincidence that *À Saint-Henri* forms such a dominant and recurring thread in *La Mémoire des Anges* for like the latter film, it too presents a complex textuality formed out of the weave of many stories, simultaneous trajectories and a passionate investment in the everyday. As with *La Mémoire* there is no overarching meta-commentary or social analysis. While the film begins by noting the industrial decline of the area and of its high incidence of poverty, it ends by discovering a resilience and dignity of the people. Lyrical and impressionistic, with narration written by Jacques Godbout, the film builds a poetic ethnography out of the fragment, the poignant vignette and the ritual gesture, locating resistance in everyday, in the tactics, tenderness and humour of its subjects. Like *La Mémoire des Anges*, *À Saint-Henri* is also highly reflexive about its own status as cinema and about the mediating function of film in the constitution of our histories, memories and realities. The final epilogue dedicates the film to Jean Rouch and to Hitchcock who "discovered the mysteries in front of our eyes."

While the primary source of images that are used to compose *La Mémoire* are drawn from documentaries, the film also and, with some regularity, integrates clips of dramatic fiction from this period (one or two featuring a luminously youthful Geneviève Bujold), documentary enactments and intentional musical performances filmed in studios. I don't believe *La Mémoire* is trying to purposefully obfuscate the existential distinction between fiction and documentary. Rather it appropriates images, whether fiction, documentary or enactment for their specific "cinematic" quality: the texture of light, the particular framing of a body, the continual motion of a pan or tilt. Indeed, part of the pleasure of *La Mémoire* is the way in which it foregrounds the incredible artistry of the NFB films of this period whose exquisite and careful compositions, atmospheric lighting, and frequent use of aerials, traveling and tracking shots were part of the repertoire of both documentary and fiction.

The 'mysteries' that *La Mémoire* explores are those of this bygone era now made palpable through the film's work of resurrection and assemblage. To be sure, there are questions one might still wish to pose to the film, concerning, for example, who is implicitly addressed by the film's title, whose singular memory could possibly

encompass or do justice to the diversity of experiences known in the past? In published interviews and in the clips on the NFB website, Luc Bourdon insists time and again that his intention was not to evoke nostalgia, but what else can we claim for this film with its idealized representation of a past that stops before the trauma of the October Crisis, of OKA, of the varied political travails that continue to reshape the experience of the city? If the film evokes nostalgia, it is for the lost and perhaps unattainable innocence of a city before the realities of immigration, de-industrialization, new ethnic and urban identities, globalization, gentrification and consumerism rendered the idea of any singular or organic collective (of angels or people) an impossible dream.

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[i] At the recent Experimental Media Congress in Toronto, (April, 2010) Sobhi Al-Zobadi showed a work incorporating a UN sponsored documentary, produced in the late 1940s, on the issue of Palestinean refugees. Sobhi uses the work to deconstruct the liberal humanism of the narrator who never once refers to how the Palestineans were actually made into refugees.

[ii] Perlumtter: http://www3.nfb.ca/medias/download/documents/pdf/tom-perlmutter/nfbtalk-en-20090128.pdf

[iii] http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/ENTRETIEN-AVEC-LUC-BOURDON.html

[iv] Here are Bourdon's actual words: "Il faut savoir que nous avons numérisé des extraits de 200 films (parfois des films au complet) afin de se créer une banque d'images. Avec Michel Giroux, le monteur, nous avons décomposé chaque film et placé les images dans des rubriques spécifiques (trains, usines, chansons, etc…), selon un ordre précis. Tout cela fut effectué avec l'idée de créer nos propres *rushes* et pouvoir se retrouver dans toutes ces images (et ces sons). L'image que j'ai pour illustrer le mode d'emploi du film est celle de prendre 200 casse-têtes, de les sortir de leurs boîtes, de les mélanger et, un par un, prendre chaque morceau afin de l'identifier spécifiquement et lui trouver une rubrique." *Hors Champs*, (http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/ENTRETIEN-AVEC-LUC-BOURDON.htm).

[vi] The French language *Vigie* series produced ten films on topics relating to industrial, agricultural and cultural subjects.

[vii] The film was made for the *Canada Carries On* series, which had started during the war but continued into peacetime with episodes on contemporary Canadian life.

[viii] The film's opening title reinforces this theme: "Out of the fusion of two languages, two outlooks, has emerged a great Canadian metropolis with many moods."

[ix] As quoted in Gary Evans, In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991). 22