

JERRY WHITE

COMMUNITIES ON THE EDGE

There was a time, and it's not so long ago, when Winnipeg was a bustling centre of innovative and experimental filmmaking. The golden era, more or less, was the 1980s and 1990s, and the key institution was the Winnipeg Film Group (WFG). Guy Maddin was the only bona fide internationally famous filmmaker that the WFG produced, but for a decade or two the whole operation was quite well-known throughout North America for sure, at least in certain circles. Halifax cinephiles likely know the WFG's work because of Solomon Nagler, an experimental filmmaker who teaches at NSCAD University but who comes from Winnipeg and retains strong ties to the WFG, which continues to support his work. Every year that city's WNDX: Festival of Moving Image also unspools a tightly curated few days of avant-garde cinema for local audiences. When Isaac Medina's film *88:88* (2015) came out, it was a reminder to Canadian and global audiences of the pioneering spirit of that place, even if so far as I can tell the work was not connected to the WFG.

That's also true of Rhayne Vermette's feature debut *Ste. Anne* (2021). Vermette is originally from the community of Notre Dame de Lourdes but has been part of the Winnipeg art scene since coming to the University of Manitoba. Rather than the WFG, the institutional support for her film came from the Cousin Collective, whose founders include the great experimental filmmaker Sky Hopinka and whose website says it "was created to provide support for Indigenous artists expanding traditional definitions and understandings of the moving image by experimenting with form and genre." The Cousin Collective is led by Indigenous people from east to west on both sides of the 49th parallel, but *Ste. Anne* is a Manitoba film through and through. Part of this is formal, as the way it uses the physical properties of film (not digital technologies but *film*) strongly recalls the traditions of North American experimental cinema that were important to the WFG. But its representations of both landscape and community are quite different,

as they bring us into territory, quite literally, that feels wondrously new in terms of experimental film practice.

As an artist, Vermette's aesthetic is based in both collage and an engagement with the physical properties of her media. Her website is home to reproductions of her visual art, most of which centralizes photography but also incorporates bits of yellowing tape, torn mattes, overexposures, and visible borders that make composite photos look slightly messier than they should. The graininess and evocative untidiness of these images strongly recall the work of American artist Joseph Cornell, whose "boxes" and then films were enormously influential on several generations of experimental filmmakers (he was most active from the 1930s to the 1950s). *Ste. Anne's* look is inseparable from the aesthetic of Vermette's collages. Rather than the variety of digital formats almost universally favoured by commercial and experimental filmmakers alike, Vermette's feature debut was shot on 16mm film (she has also made shorts on 16mm and Super 8). The difficulty of finding labs that will still process 16mm and the time and money that such lab work entails mean that those who continue to work on this format are enunciating a very real commitment to a certain understanding of moving images. For Vermette, this seems to be based on an interest in both detail and a sense of fragility. The visible grain, muted colours, and soft focus of 16mm stock, particularly when shot in low- but almost entirely natural-light settings, have exquisite qualities that are impossible to reproduce digitally, no matter how souped up your iMac might be. Because she's capturing visual tones that digital would smooth out or erase (effectively the same thing), Vermette is evoking a world whose richness has always been and remains visible, but which is in danger of being ignored or lost (again, effectively the same thing). These are images of life in small Francophone Métis communities outside Winnipeg, like the titular village, which are all economically and social fragile. *Ste. Anne* is thus held together by a rigorous attention to that which seems fragile and anachronistic, but which is in fact a wondrous part of modernity, as those with a sensitive eye can see.

In terms of North American experimental film, this is part of a serious step forward for a generation of filmmakers of which Vermette is a part. Such a film practice, because of its emphasis on various forms of abstraction, has always had the air of a high-minded apoliticism. This is ironic given that the high point of experimental cinema was arguably during the heyday of the counterculture in the 1960s. But there it is: a desire to *escape* the material-

ism and dreariness of the mainstream has long been the defining ethic of the avant garde, in cinema as in other forms. As we see with *Ste. Anne*, though, that's not a hard-and-fast rule, and the current generation of young experimental filmmakers tends to position its work politically in ways that would have been unrecognizable to many (though perhaps not all) of the practitioners of earlier periods. Sky Hopinka (a citizen of the Ho-Chunk nation once based at Simon Fraser University but now teaching at Bard College) has been an important trailblazer there, with delicately abstract studies of colours and landscapes, particularly of the Columbia River Valley, which is the home of the mixed language Chinuk Wawa (an important part of a number of his films, most explicitly in 2014's *wawa*). Much of his work also draws on a layered collage aesthetic (most vividly in 2019's *Lore*). Many of his shorter films are available on his website (www.skyhopinka.com), and they make a good starting point for understanding the overall project of *Ste. Anne*. Vemette is giving the rhythms of the eastern part of Métis territory—that is to say, Manitoba—the sort of presentation that is connected to her work as a visual artist but that is also defined by a commitment to a specific, living community that has been marginalized both in terms of national belonging (no, not all Francophones above the 49th identify as French-Canadian) and language (no, not all Indigenous people basically speak English). Difficult to describe but nevertheless profoundly moving for both aesthetic and political reasons, this impressionistic, almost completely non-narrative portrait of Francophone Métis existence is part of a group of films, many of them coming from outside the traditional art-world hotspots and defined by a political seriousness that has too long seemed to be the exclusive purview of documentary, that are using old technology to breathe new life into the notion of “cutting edge.”

I saw *Ste. Anne* as part of the streaming program of the Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF). As I've observed in this chronicle before, fall is film festival season in Canada. This is not only because of the truly global powerhouse event that is the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) but also because of seasoned veteran showcases, such as VIFF and the Montreal Festival of New Cinema, both of which traditionally unspool in October, a week or two after TIFF wraps up. Although the streaming components of these events aren't as ambitious or all-encompassing as they were at the height of the post-lockdown pandemic in 2020, a commitment to stream

has remained in these somewhat looser days, albeit one that is often limited by various geographical restrictions (some of VIFF's streaming selection, for instance, was only available to people in British Columbia).

Besides *Ste. Anne*, the best film I saw through VIFF's streaming program was *Brighton 4th* (2021), which was directed by Georgian filmmaker Levan Koguashvili. As the title indicates, it is set in the Brighton Beach area of Brooklyn, which is well-known for its large Russian immigrant population, so perhaps it's not surprising that the film has almost no English in it. What is more surprising is the way that it revises the Brighton-Beach-as-Russian sense that I think is widely known, showing it instead to be a post-Soviet meeting place, defined in equal measure by solidarity across and conflict between national groups. In addition to a lot of Russian, we also hear a lot of Georgian (the film opens in Tbilisi and centres on an old Georgian wrestling champ who travels to Brooklyn to try to help his gambling addict son) as well as some Kazak spoken by a character from Uzbekistan. The latter is part of a justice-through-kidnapping scheme that goes terribly although not irredeemably awry, and my difficulty in describing it here should give some sense of the level of cultural complexity that Koguashvili is exploring. That complexity and resistance to romantic can't-all-immigrants-stick-together-style sentimentalism make the conclusion of the film—a genuinely stirring and mournful performance of Georgian folk music—feel well-earned by a viewer who has had to work hard to make sense of what has been going on politically and ethically. Koguashvili is not as young as Vermette or even Hopinka, but his vision feels generationally connected in terms of having a shared sense of how cinema can illuminate complex, multi-faceted cultures. *Brighton 4th* is a somewhat drably photographed but powerfully melancholy vision of people hanging on at the edge of a metropolitan centre, determined to maintain a sense of connection with one another in the face of a pitiless world that seems to be erasing all such efforts at maintaining solidarity. It should soon be getting a North American release (both theatrically and via streaming), and it is well worth seeking out.