

Joy without Delusion By Shawna Dempsey



This essay was commissioned by the Winnipeg Film Group to accompany the screenings of *Stepping Through Heaven: The Personal Films of Danielle Sturk* on Fri Jan 25, 2013 and *The Strange Dreams of Alain Delannoy* on Friday Feb 8, 2013 at Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque.

Is there a Franco Manitoban voice? And if so, would it be recognizable by an outsider? It is arrogant to think that its subtlety could be discerned without the shared, deep in the heart-and-body knowledge of mother tongue. Not that the Franco Manitoban “voice” exists only in French. The Franco Manitoban community is now fully bilingual, has had to be, to combat the bigotry and assimilating entitlement of surrounding English Canada, and as a result its artists move fluidly between the languages. Even Gabrielle Roy, the grande dame of Franco Manitoban letters, contemplated, as a young writer, composing in the English language.ⁱ

So if one is to examine a Franco Manitoban culture or aesthetic, language is just one aspect to a complex living history of relationships: to distant Quebec (more of a motherland than France), to the othering English, to Aboriginal peoples (through blood and marriage), and to the Catholic Church (whose influence was, until quite recently, pervasive). I fear I, an Anglophone import from Ontario, am not up to this task, lacking a nuanced understanding of the terrain. Rather I am like the blind critic, feeling my way through Franco Manitoban art with other senses—touch, primarily... feel.

For the past decade I have had the pleasure of experiencing painting, sculpture and installation by contemporary St. Boniface visual artists such as Melanie Rocan, Eric Lesage and Colette Balcaen, and have been struck by the similarities—common themes and, for want of a better word, gentleness—that is different from that being produced by other Winnipeggers. The recent exploration of Grey Nuns by Dominique Rey is another kindred, multi-disciplinary project.

The same qualities can be found in the work of two St. Boniface talents in the film world, Danielle Sturk and Alain Delannoy, whose documentaries and animations are rapidly gaining national and international recognition.

The durational element of film and video aligns it more closely with literature, the historically pre-eminent Franco Manitoban art form. Ideas and images are built over time; narratives reveal meaning, beyond the basics of plot. Like literature, media art is experiential as opposed to object-based. We traditionally view it in darkened rooms, so that it washes over our bodies in a personal, private way, despite the public venue. Sometimes it feels akin to dreaming with eyes open. As with a book, its characters become part of us.

They move us. We laugh and weep with them. We laugh and weep in recognition of the pain and beauty of being human. Many of us who do not cry in other circumstances, cannot help but cry when watching an emotionally moving film.

Sturk and Delannoy, although experimental in approach, work within narrative structures. Both artists explore what is perhaps the most essential human story: the journey from birth to death.

In *Ciel(s)/Heaven(s)* (2010), Danielle Sturk presents us with a variety of documentary subjects, unmoored from their daily lives, in a prairie field on a magnificent summer day. They speak frankly of their experiences of death, their beliefs regarding an afterlife, and their hopes for their own (our own) inevitable passings.

Despite the uniqueness of their visions, Sturk does not consistently isolate them in the frame. They share space and time with each other, as we do with them. The film is beautifully composed with fluid, long dolly shots moving through the furrowed field, and taking heads framed by snowy clouds and a brilliant blue sky. The piece is filmed in multiple formats, and Sturk layers the varying textures. Super 8 footage in particular is used to capture the contemporary dancer (Natasha Torres-Garner), who gesturally echoes the ruminations on life and death.

The child subjects in the film are particularly moving. A boy playing on a tractor explains his intricate vision for the afterlife, including a machine that helps souls choose their future skin colour, career and destination-planet. A soft-spoken little girl talks about the final moments of her father's life, the sounds that he made. A slightly older child is distressed for those who do not believe in the afterlife, and fears that they might suffer eternally, their "skin is set on fire... and burnt over and over for eternity". Perhaps most movingly (strange for me to say, in this secular world), the smallest girl states, "Nothing happens. It's only darkness. And that's all."

In the process of answering, "what happens when we die", another question is posed: how and why should we live? One of the nine subjects in the film, filmmaker Carole O'Brien talks about the allure of suicide, since we all must die anyway. "Why are you still here?" she asks. "That's the big question."

Each of the charismatic participants glows golden in the sunshine. They reach to make sense of it all (death and hence life), and in their grappling, thoughtfully raise concepts as varied as God, science, ghosts and interplanetary soul machines. As one says, "I think it's important to be able to believe in something."

Around them, amidst them, beside and sometimes superimposed upon them moves the dancer. Her

presence in this enquiry does not feel forced nor is the effect maudlin. She embodies the quest for meaning along our inevitable journeys. She reaches to the light and collapses into the earth. This ashes-to-ashes arc and theme are even more pronounced in Alain Delannoy's hand-drawn animations, in which characters grow up, grow old and die. Often, they are also reborn again.

Delannoy's black and white line drawings provide us with a lot of space, literal and figurative, upon which we can project our longings, grief and joy. His characters never speak. They are often alone. Their surroundings are spare. Most often, their narrative is that of the quest. His characters "go in search of" something outside of themselves: orbs of energy, wind, the stars. They traverse landscapes and dimensions (past/future, life/death). Delannoy employs a personal symbolism that is dense and layered. No doubt his process as an animator contributes to this opacity of meaning. As well as multiple symbologies, there is tremendous labour implicit in each frame. Delannoy works for years on each piece, and into each piece he puts his all. The result can be rich, if somewhat mystifying. Perhaps considering the profundity of his themes, this mystery is appropriate.

In *Navette/Shuttle* (1997, 2005) a star shines brightly and the world is born from three pebbles dropped from a palm. The resulting earth/mother shelters her son who leaves home to climb (space travel conflates with the boy scaling a huge tree). After the fall, an angel gives the boy a pair of scissors, with which he cuts the same star from his chest. The hand in the sky catches the Shuttle, which transforms into the three pebbles once again.

Similarly in *Monument* (2006) the three pebbles return, this time in red, yellow and blue. Are they the trinity? The essence of life/colour? Innocence, the playthings of a child? Further spheres transform from stars to dust, and an embryonic sac to the earth to a companionable bouncing ball. In the most enchanting scene, a father figure rises up into the night sky, his clothes drop away and he becomes a constellation in the rotating orb of the heavens. The child catches his garments, dresses in them and is comforted in their oversized presence. They envelop his grief and allow him to continue his journey. The film ends when the grown child's own son appears, as he once did, in the hole in the sky, our own star, the sun. Significant to St. Boniface viewers, a symbolic rendition of the Cathedral, complete with circular, rose window, is the titular monument in this film. It burns and then rises up from the ashes, implicitly built upon the love of the protagonists, for the world and each other.

Circular narratives, circles and spheres recur throughout Delannoy's entire oeuvre, from his very first experiments as a student animator at the University of Manitoba. *Jack in the Box* (hand-drawn, 1993) and *Gravity* (computer animated, 1996), both feature hapless toys who content with malevolent spheres. The plot of *Gravity*, subtitled *Beau Jim The Victim*, is that of recurring, senseless calamity. Beau Jim is able to

screw up his courage and vanquish it once, but the second time he can only watch the oncoming disaster and suffer its impact. One senses that this will not be the last intersection between the sphere and Jim. He is not unlike the Bible's Job, and his life (and ours), will continue to throw curveballs.ⁱⁱ

There is an overt spirituality in both Delannoy and Danielle Sturk's works. More than referencing scripture and incorporating symbols of the Church, they ask big questions regarding existence, and suggest a life force or plan beyond what is apparent.

Sturk's documentaries provide a window into very particular lives and their most deeply held beliefs. Yes, her subjects go on journeys, such as creating collaborative artworks (*Farandole*), and assisting in death and childbirth (*Inspire Expire*). But what fuels those journeys is a sense of interconnectedness on a transcendent scale.

In her most recent work, *Kyden in 7 Movements* (2013), we follow a family whose youngest member is a disabled child. His needs dictate that he is the focus of the extended familial unit. However, his personality—his spirit—makes his care (physical, repetitive, exhausting work) into a gift to all who surround him. Kyden's mother asks, "Why sometimes. Why so much?" Her question, posed with a catch in her voice, wonders why so work, so much pain. But it also belies a larger question, why so much love?

This honest portrait of a brave child, his mother, sister and grandparents, is an example of ordinary people rising to extraordinary circumstances with generosity, courage and an in-the-moment presence that can only be called grace. In answering concerns about her own health, Kyden's mother responds, "I don't have time to worry about what's coming. Just have to figure out what to do... today." Similarly, Kyden's future and prognosis are not discussed.

Interviews and hand-drawn animated sequences are interwoven with unvarnished, everyday scenes of a caring community. Kyden's mother may be speaking about her family or all of us when she says, "We're each a piece of a little puzzle that, I don't know, just fits together."

Or as Alain Delannoy might say, we are each a fraction of a larger whole. His masterful animation, *Fraction* (2012), synthesizes his humanistic concerns into a perfect gem of a film about an elderly artist who remembers others through his work and the daily gestures of his life. The old man persists until the end of his days, through pain and fear, until he is literally stopped dead in the act of painting, of creating, of loving. The physical matter that makes up his body becomes as elemental as that of those who have gone before him, even as his spirit soars into a miraculous windstorm of hats.

More colourful than many of his pieces and more distilled, *Fraction* is a beautifully paced reflection upon life and death. Like *Ciel(s)* it is bathed in late-afternoon sunlight, reflecting the autumn of our lives. And like all of Sturk's documentaries, it feels wondrous—its humanity, and its reflection of our human ability to project ourselves into relationship with something vast and unknowable, is a wonder.

Perhaps herein lies a through-line in Franco Manitoban work: a celebration of the wondrous within us all, a transcendent spirit expressed heroically through the simplest acts.

As writer Mark Abley wrote in his obituary of Gabrielle Roy, "Only a few modern writers, notably Isaac Bashevis Singer, could match her gift of portraying warmth without sentimentality, joy without delusion. Even when her work described alienation and loneliness, it also reached out in hope."ⁱⁱⁱ The same can be said of Sturk and Delannoy.

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ⁱ Elaine Kalman Naves, *Writers of Montreal*, Véhicule Press: 1993

ⁱⁱ The website *Sphericity*, (www.sphericity.com) nicely sums up our cultural attraction to the circle and sphere: "As a symbolic representation of three-dimensional space, the sphere encompasses all things knowable—the atom, the cell, the earth, the sky and the universe.... In the world of time, the circle represents the beginning, the end and a return to the beginning. The sphere and the circle represent both the journey and the destination.... When thinking about the sphere, or when using it to describe our experience, we are contemplating the totality of interconnection. In the sphere, we see everything in relationship to everything else.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Abley, "A Messenger of Hope", *Maclean's Magazine*, July 25, 1983.