

# journey along a prairie river

new minimalist sask cinema

by Christina Stojanova

*Panta rhei...  
everything is in flux and nothing abides  
everything flows and nothing stays fixed  
everything is constantly changing and nothing stays the same  
- Heraclitus of Ephesus, 6th – 5th century BC*

*River* by director Mark Wihak is a quiet and deep film, whose style and meaning have found an eloquent metaphor in its title. It gently glides over the serene surface of life, obscuring its hidden currents: Patrick McLaughlin's camera slowly ogles the cityscape topped by a surreally dark-blue sky, slowly focusing on dusty, sun lit houses and streets of a prairie town (Regina?), lulled into what looks like a perennial afternoon siesta...

This peacefulness inconspicuously but powerfully draws us into the *River* of uncharted emotional depths. The first episodes introduce first Roz and then Stan, the two main characters, whose encounter seems to be made in heaven: Roz, a tall, handsome girl with striking blue eyes and dyed jet-black hair, works as an office cleaner after hours but her obsessive picture taking of an office stool gives away her aspiration for more and beyond than her current life could offer. Stan – of somewhat slender build and fashionably bald-shaved – is a university graduate who writes a book. They meet in a café and become inseparable, basking in each other's love for art, for good books and music. Then she invites him home to dinner, but he falls asleep on the floor without showing any romantic, let alone sexual, deference. She accepts this magnanimously and remains his faithful friend, more than that, the first avid reader of his manuscript. He, in turn, encourages her passion for photography. They gradually come to see art through each other's eyes and become even closer after moving together into a loft they lovingly design and furnish... He introduces her to his intellectual friends, takes her to exhibitions and open air concerts, talks to her about the famous CBC radio live broadcast, 'Afternoon at the Opera' from Metropolitan, explaining disarmingly his unusual passion by adding 'what else could you do on a Saturday afternoon when it is minus forty outside?' She mostly listens, listens tentatively and intelligently, while calmly recreating the world around her through the camera view finder... This seemingly predictable development of a friendship begins to defy our expectations, luring us into the minute details of two young people's poignant quest

for beauty while coming to terms with the newly discovered demands of their emotions, sexuality and artistic vocation.

The spontaneity of the two amateur actors, Maya Batten-Young (Roz) and Adam Budd (Stan), both graduates from the Media Production and Studies Department at the U of R, invite, no, actually coerce the viewers' emotional participation. The immediacy of their presence is rooted in two and a half months of hard work, spent with their director, a Film Production professor at the U of R, developing the characters and the story line (the film itself was shot in twenty days on a shoestring budget in Regina and its vicinity during the summer of 2006). Therefore much of their behavioural unease and sometimes clumsy exchanges are effectively integrated in the raw freshness of the dramatic situation: two inexperienced young people caught unawares by, but profoundly pleased with, their growing closeness.

The car trip to the countryside on a bright summer day, situated almost two-thirds through the film, is its centre-piece and serves as its philosophical *mise-en-abyme*.<sup>1</sup> It unfolds tacitly as the four ages of human life, where the 'progress of individual existence is tantamount to gradual surrender of the golden values of childhood' up to the point in which the process of growing old is terminated by death; a process characterized by William Blake as 'the punishment of God'.<sup>2</sup>

The golden childhood moment is marked by their early morning encounter with the train, a romantic symbol of transformation and hope for the wonderful life awaiting them beyond the horizon. With the noon-time tour of the dilapidated house and the discovery of the nest with its new feathery tenants, there come the silver age revelations of time and its elusiveness, described by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus as a river, 'where one does not step into twice for waters disperse and come together again' and where 'everything is constantly changing and nothing stays the same'. The poetic intensity of this moment anchors the bronze wisdom of memory about who we are and where we come from, captured in the confessional episode in the car. Reflected in the half rolled down car windows and shot in exquisite impressionistic style, the prairie meadows call to mind Claude Monet's sun-lit grassy knolls. With the backdrop of the lush late afternoon light, lazy sounding crickets and sporadic

chirping of birds, Stan tells Roz about his family's three-generation-old ranch and of his father's desire to pass it on to him, of his loving and understanding mother who helped him leave the ranch and the father behind, and move to the big city. Roz wrenches from the bottom of her heart the sad, and probably never told story about the early loss of her father, the 'only person she could talk to' in her youth, spent in a remote prairie corner. Clinging to each other, they wrap up fittingly their romantic journey in a small country graveyard. Against the cast iron colours of the sublime prairie sunset, in the eerie beauty of the 'magic hour', they dare playfully the inexorable finality of it all – of this gorgeous day, of their friendship, of life ...

The intensity of the characters' bonding unravels unexpectedly at the party they throw at the loft. While Roz plays a somewhat self-conscious hostess and engages in a cautious flirt with Nick (Nick Schenher), Stan surveys the choreography of her sexual pursuit with growing uneasiness, registered and even commented upon arrogantly by his nosy friend Travis (in the appropriately campy interpretation of Travis Neufeld). After a night of love making with Nick, Roz carefully confronts Stan, who is obviously devastated by jealousy and pent up anger. Their halting conversation and anxious soul searching soon escalates into a full-blown fight where, some astonishing truths notwithstanding, many nasty things are said. True to its minimalist aesthetics, both actors and director however withhold any and all directions as to whose side we should take in this bitter argument. It turns out Roz actually values Stan's friendship more than anything: in any case, more than the pleasures of a one night stand. She is very graphic as to what happened behind the thin walls of her bedroom, but draws the line when Stan, admitting he could not bear being excluded from what she was experiencing with Nick, requests even more explicit details. Thus Roz leaves it up to him (and to us) to figure out what his sexual 'issues' are.

While the trip to the countryside sums up metaphorically (and metaphysically) the beauty of their relationship, the tense argument on the day after the party reveals its underbelly, torn by utterly painful revelations, which could only be confronted with the help of a loving other. And although they decide to live separately, in a dramatic twist borrowed from real life, the concluding scenes show Roz and Stan together again, riding their bikes and going places. The quiet lyricism of this unexpected finale restores the emotional balance and our faith in this unordinary relationship.

In spite of its heightened emotionality, *River* wards off emphatically any real dangers of excessive sentimentality thanks to its minimalist visual, narrative and acting techniques, typical for all waves of cinematic (neo) realism. Characterized by 'slice of life' type of stories, focus on objective surface descriptions and unobtrusive characters, in the formation of meaning the neo-realist aesthetics give precedence to visual context rather than to narrative structure or dialogue. It should be noted however that Wihak's neo-realism is much closer to the rugged documentary-like, post-modernist explorations of Dogme 95 than to the overly dramatic penchant of post-WWII Italian Neo-Realism. While he does acknowledge that the characters of Stan and Roz were initially inspired by the remarkable spiritual bonding of the famous American artists Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, they were further custom-tailored to fit the personalities of Batten-Young and Budd.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless Stan and Roz are not merely snapshots from 'real' life, enacted by non-professional actors, as neo-realist aesthetics would have them, for they are also simultaneous commentators on



the evolving events. The Best Actress award for Maya Batten-Young at the 2007 Whistler Film Festival is the most eloquent confirmation of the versatility of this approach.

Wihak's captivating observational aesthetics (and ethical perspective) on the delicate dynamics of a friendship, emphasise the moments of his characters' total emotional exposure through a mixture of ostensible point-of-view shots and an assortment of alienating viewpoints and camera angles. Thanks to the almost hypnotic effect of its steady pulsating visual rhythm (editor Vanda Schmöckel), alternating between repetitive, relatively short visual phrases and stasis, and to the sparingly used, mostly diegetic music (original score by Eric Chenaux and Michelle McAdorey), *River* makes us take pleasure in oscillating between distanciation and identification. It is this combination of direct emotional involvement with the characters and detached contemplation of the actors' improvisation in real time, which Colin McArthur describes as a "cinema of process": an aesthetic thrown into high relief by the self-conscious composition, by the intensively saturated summer colours of the exteriors and the washed out colour palette of the interiors.<sup>4</sup>

*River* reveals a surprising closeness to Goethe's *The Sorrows*

of *Young Werther* and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, two celebrated Romantic studies of the painful, even tragic outcomes of a 'sentimental education' in a social environment, prioritizing material acquisitions and profitable career moves over emotional earnestness and romantic consistency. However, while Wihak preserves the pathos of these literary antecedents, he carefully avoids judgments and binding statements. Intuitively, blindly, often hurting each other, he lets Roz and Stan stumble upon moral principles and attitudes best suited to their time and artistic vocation, and gradually come across soul mating as their own way of transcending short-lived pragmatic fixes and non-committal (sexual) relationships. After all, referring to what Zygmunt Bauman defines as our "post-modern morality without ethics": to be moral does not 'mean "to be good," but to exercise one's freedom of authorship and/or actorship as a choice between good and evil'.<sup>5</sup>

Beneath the ostensible serenity of the ever changing *River* of life, as Heraclitus reminds us, there lies the ancient wisdom— that Time is a game played best by children or by those young at heart, keen on rediscovering since time immemorial that the identity – or the soul – of that river is always the same...

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Mise-en-abyme (French), a story within a story, a frame story in which the main narrative can be used to encapsulate some aspect of the framing story  
<sup>2</sup> A Dictionary of Symbols. 1993. Edited by J. E. Cirlot, English translation by Jack Sage (Barnes & Noble Books, New York), pp.5-6

<sup>3</sup> For more on the director and his 'manifesto', the actors, the crew and the film, please visit *River*'s official web site at <http://www.riverthemovie.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Colin McArthur, "Mise-en-scène degree Zero: Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* (1967)," French Film: Texts and Contexts, 2nd edition, ed. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p.191

<sup>5</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, UK, 1995), p. 4