

Caroline Leaf

Overview of work

The Unbearable Sadness of Being By Marc Glassman

It's not how many films you make or books you write that is important. Quality always trumps quantity, whether it's the singular novel of Emily Bronte, the sculpture of Camille Claudel, the poetry of Sylvia Plath or the films of Caroline Leaf.

The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa (1977). © NFB

The Owl Who Married a Goose: An Eskimo Legend (1974). © NFB

A true auteur, Leaf has created her own universe, inhabited by fragile creatures whose desires are thwarted by circumstances beyond their control. It's a world of rigid contrasts, of bugs and people, of owls and geese, of children and dying matriarchs, of women in darkness meeting men in the light. Leaf's colour palette has grown darker as her work has progressed. The imagery, never fulsome, concentrates on intimate details that reveal the hidden dimensions of the characters she is depicting. Always vulnerable, these characters are compelled to live out their fate in a silent and unforgiving world. If there is humour in Leaf's universe, it is wry, dark and quirky; the laughter comes out of the recognition that her characters have little, or no, control over their destinies.

The Street (1976). © NFB

Two Sisters (1990). © NFB

The animated films that Caroline Leaf created are technically remarkable. She became famous for animating sand on opaque glass that is lit from below. Later, she began to paint directly on glass. And Leaf was unafraid to animate camera moves ranging from zooms to pans to crane shots.

Leaf's two masterpieces, ***The Street*** and ***Two Sisters***, dramatize family life. Based on a short story by Mordecai Richler, ***The Street*** is set amongst the Jewish community in Montreal during the 1930s. The leading character is a young boy living in an overcrowded apartment with his mother, father, sister and dying grandmother. The boy is frustrated that his grandmother, now senile, won't die, leaving him her bedroom. When she does finally succumb, he is overcome with guilt feelings; the final image is of his sister wrapping herself in bed sheets, evoking the old lady's ghost.

Filled with colour and incident, this coupling of Richler's narrative prowess with Leaf's sensitive direction is a superb drama. Never losing sight of the central story, Leaf foregrounds the lad whenever possible, while filling the screen with representative Jewish immigrant figures from the Depression era: the bearded rabbis and older, religious men, the sad father whose eyes speak volumes about how "lucky" he is, the sexy nurse whose shoes and

stockings the neighbourhood boys peer at, as she ascends the steps to the family's house every noon hour.

Two Sisters also successfully details the life of a family, in this case, that of a couple of dowager women. Violet is an acclaimed writer who has decided to shut herself in from the world because her face is disfigured. Marie, the sister, takes care of her. It's a co-dependent relationship that is working very well until a man comes in to share their darkness out of admiration for Violet's writing. His appearance upsets the sisters' delicate balance; Marie shows herself to be more a jailer than a protector while Violet displays the courage to see the light. In the end, though, the women retreat to their cocoon, the man's visit a failure.

In addition to these two exceptional works, one must include *The Owl who Married a Goose*, *Interview* and *The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa* as significant films. *The Owl* is one of three films—the others are *The Fox and the Tiger* and *A Dog's Tale*—which deal with legends; clearly, Leaf has a personal interest in such metaphorical storytelling. *Interview*, a collaboration with Veronika Soul, is a combination of live action and animation. Leaf shows herself to be private, funny, a committed filmmaker and intensely loyal. *The Metamorphosis*, a beautifully made piece based on the first chapter of Kafka's acclaimed novella, fails to capture Gregor's inner life, and loses much of the author's humour. Still, it is an exceptional film to watch, if not fully enjoy.

Leaf's work may not be over; she still paints and makes the occasional short films. Even if it has ended, the final sequence in *Two Sisters*, with the door closing in on the hermetic darkness of the characters, feels like a fitting conclusion to an exceptional career.

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