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SEEING GREEN IN CANADA

FALL IS FILM FESTIVAL SEASON in Canada. This is signalled most splashily by the annual unspooling of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), which begins right after Telluride and right before New York (that is to say, in the beginning of September). Toronto has become more or less the most important festival in North America both because of its huge catalogue and because of the way that the international media that descends upon it sets the tone for the prestige release season that now is basically synonymous with winter. But TIFF's massiveness obscures the degree to which there are a bunch of other quite comprehensive and well-programmed events across the country during that same fall season. The Vancouver International Film Festival gives TIFF a run for its money in terms of comprehensiveness, and Montreal's Festival du nouveau cinéma has long been the great eccentric of the North American film festival community, well known for showing important new work but also material that you can't see anywhere else.

Halifax's Atlantic Film Festival isn't quite in this league, but overall their programmers do an excellent job. This is especially true considering the relatively small size of Halifax as a city and the difficulty of sustaining a film-savvy public in a place where "art cinema" venues either don't show very interesting films or, in the case of its very scrappy ciné-club Carbon Arc, only show films once or twice a week a few months out of the year. The Atlantic Film Festival's commitment to Canadian cinema is also quite strong, and every year I have the (perhaps illusory) sense that it is possible to see the important Canadian and Quebec films that wouldn't otherwise open outside Montreal/Toronto/Vancouver. This year that was basically embodied by Chloé Robichaud's new film *Pays*, a gentle, funny and melancholy story about a made-up, French-speaking, North Atlantic island-microstate that tries to arrive at a mining deal with a pushy and cynical Canadian diplomatic delegation. It was every bit as closely observed, precisely performed, and gorgeously photographed as her debut film *Sara préfère la*

course, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013.

What was most striking at this year's Atlantic Film Festival, though, were the co-productions between Ireland and Canada. There were three in total: the splashy opening night film *Maudie*, the Carol Shields adaptation *Unless*, and the political documentary *Atlantic*. To paraphrase a much-loved *Sesame Street* routine, one of these things is not like the other; one of these things just doesn't belong. Can you guess which thing is not like the other?

Maudie is a biopic about the much-loved Nova Scotia artist Maud Lewis. As I write the words "much-loved" my fingers seem to almost involuntarily move towards the delete key; she is closer to being a legendary figure around here. Before her death in 1970 she had, despite an arthritis that limited her use of her arms, painted on cards, boards, shutters, walls, and so on; her home (a small one-room cabin covered with her images) has been preserved by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. It's odd, then, that a story so closely connected with the landscape, the feel, and the rhythms of Nova Scotia should be (1) filmed in Newfoundland, (2) directed by an Irish filmmaker (who in the festival's introduction could not correctly pronounce "Newfoundland"), (3) starring the British actress Sally Hawkins as Maud Lewis, and (4) co-starring the American celeb Ethan Hawke as her husband Everett. Yes, yes: we live in a globalized world now, mustn't be fussy about such old-timey matters as the locality of settings, filmmakers, or actors. I'm certainly willing to concede a certain amount of that; we do live in a world of international co-productions now, and that is a sometimes-happy story. But my reasons for grudgingly admiring *Maudie* have less to do with the work done by the director Aisling Walsh (which is competent but very conventionally picturesque) than with the performance given by Hawkins. Hawkins, who first came to wide attention as the star of Mike Leigh's film *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008), has a terrific sense of craft that is on full display here. Like her role as Poppy in the Leigh film, Maud Lewis is a character that is inevitably going to lead to a technically demanding performance but who also needs to be played with tremendous restraint if the film is to avoid careening off into the sentimental or patronizing. That *Maudie* does indeed avoid this is largely due to Hawkins' work. Really, of course, that's as it should be. This is, after all, a biopic about Maud Lewis. The best that can be said for Walsh's work as a director is that she stays out of Hawkins' way entirely; you can't take her eyes off of her, and so actually it's a good thing that it turns out that there's not that much else interesting to look at anyway.

My very different sense of *Unless* will, I hope, indicate that I am not

inherently averse to this globalized reality. Again this is a Canadian story (based on a novel by Carol Shields) directed by an Irish filmmaker and featuring an American star, this time Catherine Keener. But this is unmistakably set on the streets and in the suburbs of Toronto. This tale of a young woman who sits in front of Honest Ed's holding a sign that says "goodness" and refusing to speak is actually more focussed on her mum, played by Keener. And again, that performance is a wonder to behold, a mature, luminous portrayal of a woman struggling both with her commitments and her shortcomings. Indeed, Keener herself sometimes seems to be struggling with the shortcomings of the material. It is not very patriotic to say it, but I have often found the prose of my fellow American-Canadian awkwardly overwrought and prone to emotional musings of a semi-nonsensical complexity. At the end of the film, when the daughter finally talks to her mother about whether it is possible to really feel love (or something like that; it is hard for me to remember it exactly because it seemed so embarrassingly precious), it's a joy to see Keener puzzle with the question, struggle to answer it in the manner of a patient, loving mother confronted with the sincere but ultimately somewhat silly ponderings of her young-adult daughter. Director Alan Gilson also captures a gently observed sense of suburban life; images of Keener on the porch in winter, drinking coffee and looking around, are resonant because of their simplicity and their confidence. This is the highly educated, semi-bohemian bourgeoisie of the English-speaking Nordic world, evoked in gorgeous, deeply composed images that are every bit the equal to the performances that unfold within them. The words that are spoken are sometimes a different story, but oh well. Keener and Gilson more than make up for that.

Atlantic is a coproduction of an entirely different nature. Risteard Ó Domhnaill's documentary moves between Norway, Ireland, and Newfoundland (which the celebrated Irish actor Brendan Gleeson pronounces just fine in his voice-over narration) to tell the story of how resource extraction—fish and oil, basically—can or can't be made to work for the countries that engage in it. I feel like I know the politics of two of these three countries reasonably well, and while I entirely agree with Ó Domhnaill's analysis of Ireland and how her people basically got the shaft from EU-led fishing policies, his romantic view of Danny Williams' Newfoundland strikes me as naive. While I may be mistaken (since, as is always the case with festival reports, I am basing this on a single viewing), I do not recall hearing the word "Conservative" in the film at all. Williams as a fighting man of the people is part of the story, for sure. But Williams as a Newfoundland Tory is certainly just as big

a part, so it feels weirdly incomplete for that to be so totally absent from the analysis. That makes me a little suspicious of the film's great admiration for Norway, about whose politics I know basically nothing except for the fact that its government has for generations socked away loads of its oil revenues in the kind of "Heritage Fund" that so many Albertan progressives used to long for. Despite these misgivings, *Atlantic* is a film that I admired; a lot of the footage shot on board ships is fabulously visceral, and the decision to have the film scored by Caomh n   Raghallaigh (Ireland's most experimental fiddle player) was a stroke of genius. Although *Atlantic* might seem to be, to return to *Sesame Street*, the co-production that just doesn't belong, it actually shares a great deal with *Unless*, inasmuch as it is a film that really does work hard to be in the place whose story it is trying to tell.

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Summer, on the other hand, is film festival season in Europe. The Cannes Film Festival, which unspools in May, is basically the kick-off of the annual world cinema cycle, the event by which most festivals worldwide (including Toronto) set their watches. That's somewhat less the case with the Locarno Film Festival, which takes place in Italian Switzerland in August and has a kind of maverick sensibility that makes it seem like the bigger brother to Montreal's Festival du nouveau cin ma. I attended this year for the first time since 2006, and while I found it a little depressing to see how much English had displaced French in the festival's operations and events (Italian remains as central as it ever was), I came away feeling like I had seen a tremendous amount of work that would otherwise remain hidden. While Locarno is important for presenting new world cinema, it also has a well-earned reputation for its historical rigour. Thus it's not surprising that in presenting a "biopic" about the godfather of the American avant-garde Jonas Mekas (Douglas Gordon's *I Had Nowhere to Go*), they also chose to show his best film, *Walden* (1969), in its entirety. This three-hour epic of the New York (and environs) avant-garde in its heyday is a work that is much more widely discussed than seen, and I confess to never having viewed it before my Swiss sojourn. I had planned to watch an hour or so to get a sense of it and then bug out to another screening, but I could not. It has been a long time since I found myself so totally engrossed by a film, so fully pulled in by its spectacle, its intimacy, and its occasional cheesiness. In my last column I suggested that Chantal Akerman's 1975 epic *Jeanne Dielman* was the *Star Wars* of my 19-year-old self, a film whose total approach to its

craft made everything after seem different. *Walden* has become, basically, the *Star Trek* of my 45-year-old self: a glimpse at another planet, sometimes excessive in its sincerity and unselfconsciousness, but unstintingly generous in its desire to present a little utopia where people had conflicts but basically defined their lives by a passionate curiosity about the infinite diversity of their surroundings. Mekas talked in his introduction about how he and his colleagues had given birth to a lot of the aesthetics associated with digital cinema, that he and his friends in the American avant-garde of the 1960s were the first to really democratize cinema by making films about their lives, their friends, their landscapes, and their homes. He is an indisputably important figure in this way, and so it's a joy that his films are now available on DVD. Interested readers can find them fairly easily at his website, JonasMekas.com. *Walden* is available there too, but for me it forever remains a 16mm-only experience; the grain of the film, the flutter, and the paradoxical intimacy that a big screen offers were all central to my experience of the film. Locarno is a small town and hard to get to; *Walden* alone would have made it worth the trip.