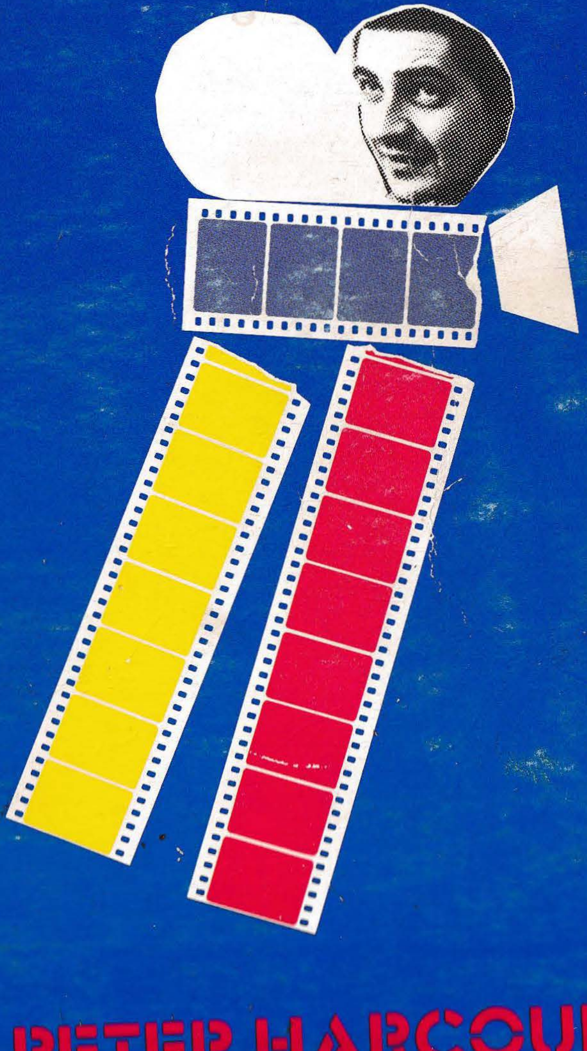
JEAN PIERRE LEFEBVRE



PETER HARCOURT

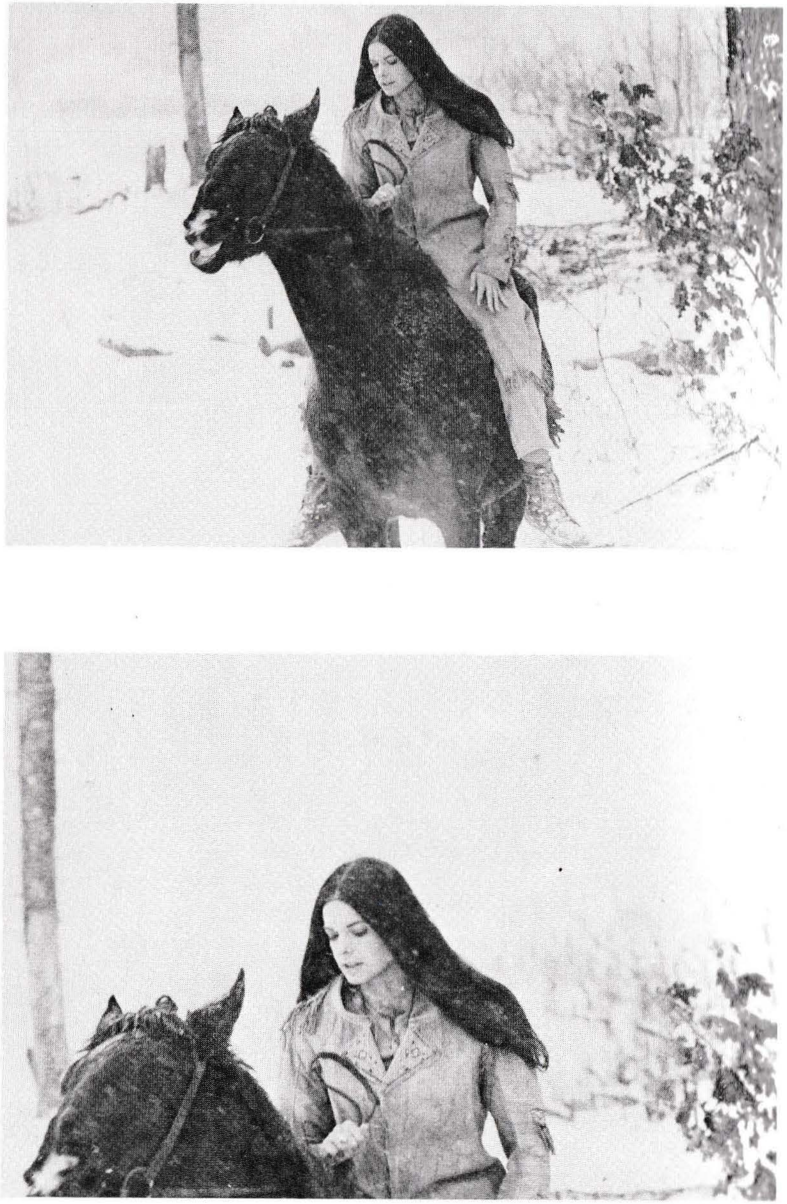
Lefebvre's Pellucid History Lesson

Les maudits sauvages (1971) opens with a freeze frame from the penultimate scene in the film — a shot that shows us a young man in a tavern holding a young woman's head, while savage drums beat wildly on the sound-track. Startling as an opening, it is not immediately intelligible. We have to have seen the whole film to be able to situate this particular moment. So it is frequently with the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre. So it is too that to see all his films aids us enormously in understanding individual achievements. We have to learn his language.

If *La chambre blanche* dealt with the formation of the couple, as if apart from history, *Les maudits sauvages* presents us with the history of our country, a history that is real but which has been denied. After the opening shot, we have a title, like all the titles in this film, shot in blood red and royal purple: "No one is responsible before history. We are all . . . " Thus the title breaks off and asks for completion, a completion that takes place later in the film.

The film proper begins with a shot of Tékacouita, the young woman, the back of her head towards the camera, walking towards a river. As she turns her face left, she is joined in the frame by Zoro, the

Zoro's departure (top), and return (bottom), in *Les maudits sauvages*



Moving in on Tékacouita in *Les maudits sauvages*

young man, who presents her with an amulet which he ties around her neck. While this sequence has already been given a lyrical uplift by the Vivaldi flute concerto that we hear on the sound-track, it is rendered even more lyrical and mysterious by the fact that he speaks to her in Cree — a language that we cannot understand.[1]

After he has spoken to her, they turn slowly in a circle, forehead to forehead, eye to eye, in a way that very much implies the same kind of full acceptance that characterized the end of *La chambre blanche*. Then, as they continue to turn in circles in their sad little dance, Lefebvre comes in and tells us what Zoro has been saying:

> Tékacouita, my friend of the rivers, sun, and wind; Tékacouita, heart of my heart who will soon become flesh of my flesh; Tékacouita, for the last time I have to leave you. But after I have killed the cariboo, I'll come back to you. You will be my wife and I will be your husband. And our children will be flesh of our flesh and heart of our hearts and friends of the rivers, sun, and wind.

Biblical in its cadences, liturgical in the effect it can have upon us, this opening speech embodies what I want to call the religious sensibility that characterizes the Indian voice throughout this film, chiefly through the monologues spoken by Tékacouita. But after this prologue, the opening title appears followed by an additional title: *"l'eau de vie et de mort"* — the water of life and death. This metaphor is more far-reaching than the specific references to the river or to alcohol. It suggests as well (as in *La chambre blanche*) the paths that we must choose in life, towards affirmation or denial. The film is also described in its opening title as "almost a historical film" and it is precisely dated — 1670-1970. It is one of the magnificent achievements of this particular film that it so easily intermixes both periods of time.

After the titles, we cut to the first of Tékacouita's soliloquies. In the course of the film, there are five soliloquies. Each one is delivered, voice-over, against a black-and-white still of her riding a horse. This still both suggests the movement that is denied her and a sense of arrested flight. Furthermore, each time a soliloquy occurs, we move in closer to the picture as if to trap her so that the last soliloquy shows her body in mid close-up, as if denying her her horse.

These moments in the film are extraordinarily powerful. They create the values that the Indians believed in and which the white men, whether French or English, in the interests of commerce, have systematically destroyed.

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[1] While historically Tékacouita was an Iroquois, Lefebvre used Cree for this film both to universalize the situation and to avoid the stereotype of Indian speech that the nasal tones of Iroquois might have conveyed.

At least the first soliloquy must be given in full:

> Formerly, this land belonged to no one. Then it became ours. It has been the land of our tribes and our gods. In order to subsist and clothe ourselves, we killed animals and plants.
>
> Then the white man came. And they killed an equal number of animals but to make themselves rich. Then came other white men. And they killed the first white men just to prove they were the stronger. And that is why, nowadays like formerly, this land belongs to no one.[2]

After this soliloquy, we see the trader, Thomas Hébert (Pierre Dufresne),[3] coming out of the woods and leading his horses laden with supplies past the river where the Indian couple are still slowly turning. He is on his way to an Indian camp to offer them fire-water and other gifts. The gifts include a present-day carton of cigarettes — white-man's peace pipe, as he calls them — plus a transistor radio that brings, as he again explains, "voices of gods from heaven and hell."

This sequence is a splendid example of how Jean Pierre Lefebvre can make his minimalist techniques work for him. The entire sequence is shot without a cut and it is mostly in long-shot. For sensibilities conditioned by the editorial excitements of television commercials, this kind of effect might initially seem boring. The "action" that we must train ourselves to observe exists not in obvious cinematic excitements but in the details of human gesture that are exchanged between the characters. We must constantly scan the image as we would a painting to discover (and be moved by) what is going on.

As the Indians smoke their modern cigarettes, they break out into laughter — something that I will describe as the laughter of incomprehension. Just as we, the audience, at this point in the film, cannot comprehend how this seventeenth-century trader can be bringing his Indians gifts from our own century, so the Indians cannot (and did not) comprehend what was being done to them at that time. This incomprehension is important as it is recapitulated by the final scene of the film.

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[2] As elsewhere in this study, the translations from the French are very free adaptations of the original. Especially for the poetic writings of Jean Pierre Lefebvre, here as in *Avoir 16 ans* I felt I must reject the rhythmically insensitive English of the sub-titles.

[3] Like the film itself, the name Thomas Hébert may be "almost historical." Marcel Rioux has suggested that Louis Hébert is virtually the father of the Québécois. See *Les Québécois*, by Marcel Rioux. (Montréal, Le Temps qui court, 1977), p. 8.

In their gratitude for all his gifts, the Indians give Hébert the beautiful Tékacouita. He promises her lots of jewels and other possessions as he forces a ring upon her finger; but not only can she not understand his French, as an Indian she also cannot understand the value of possessions.

Their journey back to town is also a journey towards the present. In a series of long-shots, we see them enter and leave the frame, against all the rules of conventional narrative editing. (Cut on action, all the Hollywood text-books say.) As they continue their journey both towards the present and the city, first some pylons appear in the frame, they then pass some old farm houses, and finally we see a traffic sign pointing away from the direction in which they are going. As at the end of *Le révolutionnaire*, this little gag suggests that they are going the wrong way.

Throughout the entire action of the film, Tékacouita has no voice. Only in her frozen monologues is she allowed to speak. Present-day Montreal contains nothing but horrors for her, whether it is her shame at being presented to Madame Hébert or her terror when confronted by an encyclopedia salesman who immediately tries to rape her. Between these two scenes, however, we have her second soliloquy, in which she cries out the grief that, in this de-naturalized world, she has no active voice:

> I am part of my people but my people are apart from me. And my country is flooded with lakes and rivers because I have shed so many tears.

Equally central to this film is l'Abbé Frélaté, Lefebvre's portrait of the missionaries who played their own part in the colonization of this country. As his name implies in French, he is a man who has imperfectly understood the role that he has been asked to play in the creation of this new world.[4] He seems an immensely self-pitying man, longing for martyrdom. In fact, he seems to long for death in order to escape the pain endemic to his part in the colonization process. He must convert "these poor savages" to a religion less holy, less wholesome than his own.

Both Marie, his housekeeper, and Madame Hébert recognize his weaknesses. Disgusted with her husband and disillusioned by the role she has been given to play in this new country, Madame Hébert

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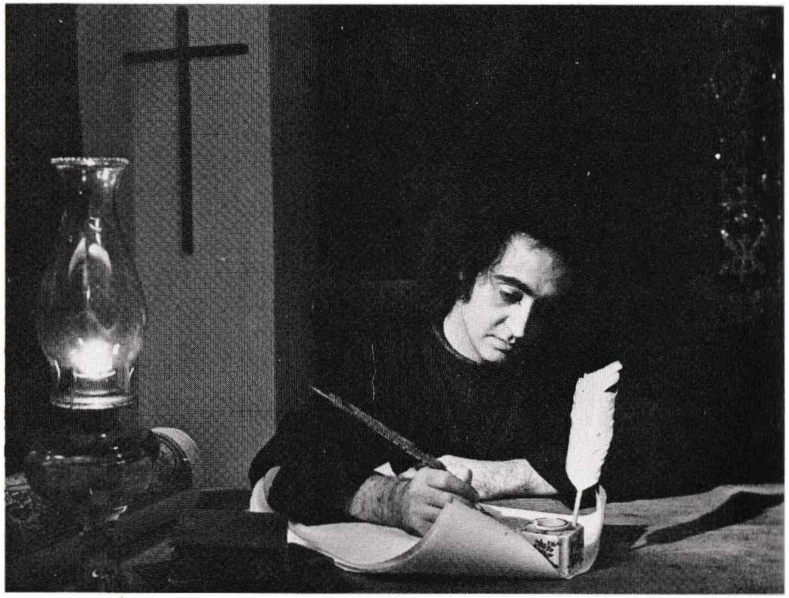
[4] In French, the word *frelaté* is used to refer to an alcohol that has been imperfectly distilled. By extension, in the film this word might imply, not that the church was wrong in what it was doing but that it had imperfectly understood the implications of what it was doing.



Longing for martyrdom in *Les maudits sauvages*

decides to return to France. "I think we were wrong to colonize this country," she explains at one moment to l'Abbé Frelaté. "But there must be a beginning of everything," he rationalizes. "But also an end," she declares. She recognizes the mistakes and the ravages that are part of the colonization process.

If this film is one of the most serious that Lefebvre has ever made, in parts it is also very funny. It possesses that sense of absurdity that characterized both *Le révolutionnaire* and *Il ne faut pas mourir pour ça*. This is partly the result of the two time spans that this film sets out to fuse. Absurdly primitive medical treatment is set within the modern decor of the Montreal General Hospital; while during an earlier moment in the film, we see Thomas Hébert walking along a shop-glittered street and entering a restaurant to get a cup of coffee. In the restaurant, he watches a television interview between the host of the programme (played by Lefebvre) and Jean Talon (played by Marcel Sabourin), one of the early governors of *La Nouvelle France*. This is a magnificently comic sequence because, as host of the programme, Lefebvre is asking the most elaborately detailed questions about the economic realities of the colony to which Talon, his eyes rolling about as if in total incomprehension, responds with

Trapper Hébert watching television in *Les maudits sauvages*

metaphorical evasions. Then as now, this sequence clearly demonstrates, politicians have always been the same.

Denied the tribal rituals which should have been her right, Tékacouita ends up dancing topless within the fabricated pseudo-ritual of a Montreal tavern, with "savage" drums encouraging her ecstasy. Deserted by Zoro at the opening of the film, when he goes off to hunt the cariboo, so she is deserted by Hébert at the end of the film as he goes off to ply his trade.

As the film opened with a freeze-frame that anticipated the conclusion, so the film ends with a recapitulation of the sequence after the opening titles where we see the trader Hébert coming out of the woods with his horses, passing by the couple turning round and round by the river, challenging in this way our sequential sense of time. After this scene we have the last of Tékacouita's remorseful soliloquies. As so frequently in the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre, this last soliloquy contains oblique references to death, to "the black raven which my people have allowed to pluck out their eyes." She concludes:

> This country [of the raven] has no boundaries, for this country no longer exists. Yet this country is mine and I am this country.

If this country is specifically, in terms of the film, the country of the Indians, it is also, by extrapolation, the country of the Québécois. By further extrapolation, it could also be the country of all colonized peoples.

The voice of Tékacouita speaks for all those people who feel that a foreign voice and a foreign set of values have been imposed upon them. It represents the voice of all people, in whatever nation, that value human life over exploitation, that value personal relationships over the stock broker deals of commerce. This is why the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre, so Québécois in the specificity of their utterance, can speak to many people throughout all parts of the world.

By the time Hébert reaches the Indian encampment, all the Indians have been killed. Initially it is not clear just who has killed them. By inference from the following sequence, however, the slaughter must have been inflicted by Zoro when he returned from his cariboo hunt and found his tribe so debased that he felt he must destroy them.[5] Similarly, in the next sequence, he feels he must destroy both Tékacouita and himself.

L'Abbé Frelaté is also at the encampment, delivering last rites to all the slaughtered Indians — as useless a gesture as ever the church could perform. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," says Hébert as he shoots the priest. "You wanted death. I have fulfilled your wishes," he explains as he closes the dead priest's eyes. "You are the martyr and I am the guilty one." So in our society, for many centuries now, have the values of commerce destroyed the values of religion.

As if conscious of his guilt, Hébert throws away his gun and screams out against the cosmos as he gulps down the lethal "firewater" until he passes out on the ground. Then, after the scene in the tavern where Zoro slaughters both himself and Tékacouita, we cut back to the encampment again where we see Hébert waking up on the ground now covered with snow. The slaughtered bodies have all disappeared. He looks left and then right, and as the camera follows his gaze, it picks up a group of "hippies" passing a joint around their circle while sitting in the snow.

This sharing of a joint represents a new kind of ritual. Rituals are necessary for all collective identities. But the communal ritual of marajuana as it was popular in the sixties was a ritual based on ignorance. One cannot return to more primitive values unless one acknowledges what those values actually entailed.

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[5] Lefebvre himself, however, rejects this "closure." See "A Conversation," p. 127.

When Hébert joins the circle and smokes in the amnesiac delights of yet another kind of peace-pipe, his laughter recapitulates the laughter of the Indians when they first tasted his cigarettes. And when he begins to hoot away in a supposedly Indian fashion, a hooting that is picked up by the rest of the group as we cut back through a series of increasingly distant long-shots and move towards the end of the film, we get the sense once again of what I have called the laughter of incomprehension. These people are ignorant of history. While attempting to return to the values of the earth, they are unaware of the role played by their white forefathers who systematically destroyed the truly earth values of the culture of the Indians.

"No one is responsible before history," the opening title proclaimed. We are all..." I think by the end of the film, that incompleted sentence implies that we are all responsible not for *what* has been done but for recognizing what we have inherited and for acknowledging the values that our own lives are perpetuating. This, I take it, is the "moral" of this extraordinarily perceptive film.

tality of the *coureurs de bois*: just find your way out as best you can, while keeping yourselves alive. That's all. Now I don't mean to say that this is the mentality of the Québécois. But some part of it remains in our mentality. Like, we've been exploited, here and here and here; so let's exploit other people just a little bit, in order to survive.

That's why we have never been really angry at the Indians, never angry at the church, never really angry at the English, because in a way all of them helped us to become what we are. They helped us to survive. This situation even gave us a certain sense of pride, because we were able to survive by ourselves. We had to struggle for whatever life we could have.

This is very different from the people who have more recently colonized the Canadian west. They too had to fight, but they achieved their success so quickly. The land was so rich, the social situation so helpful, and by now, they own that land. They are proud to own it and are proud to be part of what they consider to be a free country; but even so, they do not realize that they have destroyed a civilization which I still consider to be the most peaceful civilization that has ever existed.

But maybe we too have survived by not really understanding the civilization that was here before us. I don't mean to suggest that we have to go back to a different way of living. Obviously, we can't. But if we choose to forget the past, we are also responsible for it. And we have to understand that responsibility, especially if we want to be something more than chauvinistic nationalists.

And accusing other people for the past doesn't help anything, does it?

Exactly.

Yet I don't quite relate what you've just said about the ***coureurs de bois*** *to the trapper Hébert as he's presented in the film. Surely he's presented in a very unattractive light. I don't take him as standing for the present-day Québécois in any way, or even for their ancestors.*

But that's what I've been saying. Of course, he's unattractive. That's why we don't relate ourselves to the past. We don't like what happened, surviving by exploiting a little bit here and there and still being able to run away into the woods whenever we were afraid of something, or didn't like something. Think of the last war, of all those Québécois who didn't want to be involved and simply ran away into

the woods. But that is something we have to recognize. In *Les maudits sauvages*, I had no intention of creating yet another myth about the *coureur de bois*. Whatever he was, he is not a man to imitate.

And that ending which has troubled me for so many years, with the hippies smoking the joint and then all hooting away like savages, I guess this underlines the artificiality of the ritual if you don't know the history of it.

I couldn't say it more clearly myself. That's it. Because, you know, at the time, it was the love-and-peace generation, and many young people were finding a kind of tribal life so extraordinary and they thought they were trying to live the way their ancestors did. It was a kind of dream.

And the Indian lad, Zoro, who slaughters his own tribe and then kills both himself and Tékacouita, does he do this basically to restore his own dignity?

Well that is open to interpretation. I didn't want to make it clear. It's a basic question that is asked after every screening. Who killed the Indians? It's not clear for people. Did Zoro kill them? We don't know. The only important thing is that he kills Tékacouita, because there's no way that he can regain his dignity without killing her. That's his male pride. I'm not saying that men should be like that. I'm just saying that that's what's in the film.

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Tell me the true story of ***Backyard Theatre****—the film that both you and Marguerite refused to sign and which has never appeared in any of your filmographies. First of all, how did you get involved in such a project, working once again for the National Film Board, and this time for the English and for that dreadful "Adieu Alouette" series?*

Well, they asked me. In fact, they asked a couple of Québécois directors to do a couple of films because they were afraid that if the whole series was directed only by English directors, there might be some trouble from people in Quebec. It was mainly Jean-V.

UN SUCCÈS COMMERCIAL OU Q-BEC MY LOVE OU STRUGGLE FOR LOVE

77 minutes, 35mm, bw (Kodak 5222), 1.66:1
Production company: Cinak compagnie cinématographique. Executive producer: Laurence Paré. Director/screenplay: Jean Pierre Lefebvre. Photography: Thomas Vamos. Sound: Claude Hazanavicius. Editing: Marguerite Duparc. Music: Andrée Paul, played by L'Infonie. Song "Q-bec My Love" written and sung by Raoul Duguay. Sound mixing: Raghbir Gadhoke. Assistant director: Michel Audy. Assistant cameraman: André Dupont. Still photography: Attila Dory. Electrician/grip: Roger Martin. Make-up: Norma Fiorentu. Laboratory: Associated Screen Industries.
Cast: Anne Lauriault (*Q-bec*), Dennis Payne (*Peter Ottawa*), Larry Kent (*Sam Washington*), Jean Pierre Cartier (*Jean-Baptiste Bilingue*), Judith Paré, Raoul Duguay, André Caron.
Shot on location in Montreal from November 8 to 12, 1969.
Première: Arlequin, Montreal, March 12, 1970.
Released: Arlequin, Montreal, March 13, 1970.
Cost: $25,000

1966-70

MON OEIL

87 minutes, 16mm, bw (Kodak 7222) and colour (Kodak 7252)
Production company: Cinak compagnie cinématographique. Director/screenplay: Jean Pierre Lefebvre. Additional photography: Jacques Leduc. Editing: Marguerite Duparc. Assistant directors: Pierre Hébert, André Théberge. Still photography: Michel St-Jean. Post-synchronisation: Cinélume. Laboratory: Sonolab.
Cast: Raoul Duguay, Katia Bellangé, Janou Furtado, Céline Bernier, Huguette Roy, Magmadbouboun, Pauline Fortier, Andrée Paul, André Leduc, Denys Arcand and the pirates from the NFB: Yvon Malette, Pierre Hébert, Don Arioli, Pierre Bernier, Gérard Paquin. With the participation of Camil Houde, M. Messier, Ronald Perrault, Jacqueline Leduc and Laurent Choquette's family.
Shot on location in Montreal and the Eastern Townships in twenty days during July and August 1966.

Released: Verdi, Montreal, January 29, 1971.
Cost: $25,000
Note: The main photography credit was omitted at the request of the cameraman.

1971

LES MAUDITS SAUVAGES

ou l'eau de vie et de mort

115 minutes, 35mm, colour (Kodak 5254), 1.66:1
Almost an historical film (1670-1970). Production company: Cinak compagnie cinématographique, with the participation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. Executive producer: Laurence Paré. Director/screenplay: Jean Pierre Lefebvre. Photography: Jean-Claude Labrecque. Sound: Claude Lefebvre. Editing/production manager: Marguerite Duparc. Sound mixing: Jack Burman. Music: Vivaldi by Walter Boudreau. Musical recording: Les Studios André Perry. Assistant director: Robert Blondin. Assistant cameramen: Yves Delacroix, Richard Sadler. Boom: Gilles Gingras. Electrician: Séraphin Bouchard. Grip: Richard Joyal. Make-up: Suzanne Rioux Garand. Still photography: Attila Dory. Costumes: Gilles Gagné, assisted by Michel Têtu. Props: David Gold. Script assistant: Francesca Pozzy. Laboratory: Bellevue Pathé (Québec).
Cast: Pierre Dufresne (*Thomas Hébert*), Rachel Cailhier (*Tékacouita*), Nicole Filion (*Mme Jeanne-Mance Hébert*), Luc Granger (*l'abbé Pierre Frelaté*), Jacques Thisdale (*Zoro*), Gaétan Labrèche (*Historion*), Jacques Desnoyers (*Cul de Bouteille*), Denise Morelle (*Marie*), Yvon Dufour (*a policeman*), Jean-Pierre Cartier (*a policeman*), Denis André (*the innkeeper*), Marcel Sabourin (*l'intendant Jean Talon*), Roger Garceau, Claude Belisle, Jean Beaudin, Jean-René Ouellet, Isabelle Claude, Lucille Robinson, André Leduc, Jacques Morin, Catherine Blackburn, Pauline Blackburn, Pierre Blackburn, Diane Cailhier, Jean Lévesque, Annick de Bellefeuille, Marc Deschamps, Jean Guillemette, Djibril Djob Mambetti.
Shot on location in Montreal and Mascouche during the first three weeks of December 1970.
Première: Les Cinémas du Vieux-Montréal (Studio B), Montreal, October 29, 1971.
Other title: THOSE DAMNED SAVAGES
Cost: $135,000