

IMMANENT TO EXCLUSION: A REVIEW OF LOVE IN THE TIME OF CIVIL WAR

Adam Szymanski

Broke, HIV-positive, homeless and alone, Alex (Alexandre Landry) staggers down a bleak snowy street in Montreal's east end, cursing his life, his friends, and most of all, the society that has condemned him to an itinerant life of hard-drug use and sex work. He doesn't say much, but the few words he mutters under his breath are loaded with the desperation of a man on the brink of collapse.

Rodrigue Jean's latest film *Love in the Time of Civil War* (*L'amour au temps de la guerre civile*, 2014) has a lot in common with its protagonist. Neither can be bothered with useless chatter, superfluous aesthetics, or excessive drama. Everyday experience, especially for those violently marginalized by the neoliberal city, already packs enough raw intensity to fill a film, and then some. *LTCW* doesn't need plot to build suspense; there's already plenty of that in the shadows of Montreal's streets that Jean and screenwriter Ron Ladd know so very well. Building on *Épopée*, me, a collaborative online collection of short films written and directed with people living in Montreal's "exclusion zone,"¹ *LTCW* knits a tight

account of a few days in the life of similarly disenfranchised characters as they struggle to survive and escape desolation through drugs. Their hardships start to make love look like a luxury that they will never be able to afford.

The film opens with friends Alex and Bruno (Jean-Simon Leduc) smoking crack as dull daylight enters their downtrodden hotel room. They take a momentary breather to stretch out on the bed, and then vigorously fuck before stopping to take another hit. The scene marks the beginning of a pattern that develops over the rest of the film. There's tons of sex in *LTCW*, but none of it lasts more than a couple of minutes. After a few hard thrusts of one alienated body into another—thrusts that seem to provide relief from pain rather than actual pleasure—more pressing urges demand fulfillment. Without the money to rent a room or to buy the next hit, Alex hits the streets. That's exactly where he spends the bulk of his time, hustling for johns and running random errands for pals in exchange for heroin or a place to stay.

Civil War is a mature representation of sex work, which is no surprise given Jean's previous documentary achievement *Men For Sale* (*Hommes à louer*, 2008). Without mythologizing (like Julia Leigh's *Sleeping Beauty*, 2011), glamorizing (like François Ozon's *Young & Beautiful*, 2013), or romanticizing (like the Joshua and Benny Safdie's *Heaven Knows What*, 2014), Jean's camera meticulously tracks the quotidian existence of young people who make their living by moving from hit to hit and fuck to fuck. In one brilliant scene, Alex's drug-dealing friend Simon wakes up in the back seat of a rental car with his girlfriend Jeanne. Feeling horny, he asks Jeanne to suck him off. She tells him it will cost forty dollars, and then jumps out of the car to sell that very service to motorists in the Montreal neighbourhood of Hochelaga. *LTCW* shows how in an economic system where everything including the body, touch, and mystery are monetized, it can be hard to parse out where sex work begins and ends, and where love starts. Insights like this complicate the naiveté and moralism that colour the discourse around prostitution in Montreal.

LTCW's politics emerge from its aesthetic of pure immanence. The film's cinematography is true to the social and psychic reality of the characters depicted. Jean's camera follows Alex's aberrant movements from back-alley drug deals where homeless sex workers beg for their next fix, to the ominous blue-lit basement of a video store where Alex retrieves a transgender acquaintance who has passed out, to the

loses his temper and physically attacks him in a bout of homophobic rage. Alex has already spent some time in prison after a police sting caught him acting as a chauffeur for one of Simon's drug deals, and now supposedly free, he finds himself imprisoned yet again.

These claustrophobic shots leave no possibility for escape or change. Jean has found a shooting style and set arrangement appropriate to the way



cramped confines of the apartments that Alex finds himself inhabiting. Wherever Alex's life leads, *LTCW* is willing to follow him, frequently in a tight shot that frames the back of his head and blocks out much of the surrounding environment.

Later in the film, one particularly striking shot takes this film style to its limit. It pictures Alex smoking a cigarette in front of closed blinds that resemble jail bars, right before his friend Eric

that oppression creates the conditions for its perpetuation. *LTCW* doesn't need to show Alex's face in order to make the affective tenor of his life felt. The absence of potential for things to be otherwise is expressed by the shot composition. After close to 120 minutes of these sorts of shots, the film can start to feel pretty nihilistic—but this isn't nihilism for nihilism's sake.

LTCW is better read as a clear-headed

response to the brute fact that the rich are winning the class war and life is getting harder for the rest of us. In Montreal, like elsewhere, austerity politics are accompanied by the increased militarization of the city's police force, as well as the criminalization of political demonstrations that have not been pre-approved by the police (as per municipal law P6). These developments intensified during the Quebec-wide student strike of 2012. At once wildly successful in mobilizing the public and bringing down Quebec's Liberal government that had jacked up tuition fees, the strike was also a bitter failure in that it was followed by a blatantly xenophobic Parti Québécois government that severely slashed postsecondary education funding.

to the movements of desiring bodies within the city space. Eventually, Alex wanders through the group of protests before continuing on his own. Excluded, yet again. *LTCW* concludes without any assurances that things will get any better, but neither does it foreclose the possibility that things could, if only the social upheaval that has been percolating for some time now were to erupt into full-scale revolution. Thus, as saturated with despair as the film may be, it is better thought of as realist than nihilist: it has simply found an aesthetic faithful to the social and psychic realities of contemporary exclusion.



The final scene firmly cements *LTCW* in this local political context. Alex is in no better situation than he was at the beginning of the film. His closest friend Bruno has just unexpectedly died of an overdose, and he wanders out onto the street yet again, this time in the midst of the student protests captured so forcefully by the Épopée collective's poetic documentary *Insurgence* (2013).

The students march, and the police rough them up. Class war is played out in the streets and Alex is caught up in the middle of it. Jean's concluding images connect the interests of sex workers and students in a lucid moment of intersectional critique that emerges immanent

¹ The Épopée collective uses the term "exclusion zone" in reference to the east end of Montreal's downtown. The area has inherited many of the sex workers who used to work in the red-light district of Saint Laurent boulevard before its gentrification as part of the Place des Arts project.