

Australian- Canadian Studies

A Journal for the Humanities and the Social Sciences

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Cover:

Still from *Black Robe*



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REVIEW ESSAY

JANE FREEBURY
**BLACK ROBE:
IDEOLOGICAL CLOAK AND DAGGER?**

Australian and Canadian filmmakers have worked together on occasion with intriguing results, like the memorably sinister Wake in Fright (Ted Kotcheff, 1971), an exploration of the dark side of Australian mateship in a remote corner of the outback. Overseas directors and actors came to work in Australia with increasing frequency during the 1970s and by the 1980s "off-shore influences" were well established within the Australian film industry. For some time it had been clear that the domestic market would not sustain an industry on the scale that was operating without overseas sales. What was not clear was the extent to which "offshore influence" should be allowed input into films made here.

Since 1986 an official co-production agreement has made it possible for the Canadian or French, UK, German or New Zealand film industries to collaborate creatively and financially with the Australian industry — this being a way for these small national industries to compete internationally against the hegemony of Hollywood. An early project under this scheme (with the UK as a third co-producing party) was Not for Glory, Not for Gold, which, it was intended, would be scripted by an Australian and directed by a Canadian.

Had it come about it would have been the first co-production to emerge from this scheme. It was not realized as originally conceived, but was made and released under another title in 1987, as the British and Australian co-production, The Four Minute Mile, a television mini-series, scripted by Australian screenwriter and playwright David Williamson, and directed by UK director Jim Goddard.

The Four Minute Mile has a shape you might think proper to a co-production, being a narrative sprawling across continents, and the dramatization of events surrounding an historic clash between athletes

Roger Bannister of Britain and John Landy of Australia at the 1954 Vancouver Empire Games. The film was shot in the UK and Australia with a cast and crew from each country.

As an epic based on the experiences of Jesuit missionaries in seventeenth-century New France, *Black Robe* also sprawls across continents — those which contain France and Canada (New France) — and looks like another two-hander, but a French-Canadian collaboration, rather than the Australian-Canadian collaboration that it is. After all the events which take place in the film occurred when Australia was a large southern land mass only just taking shape under the European cartographer's hand: *Black Robe* offered no scenario for harsh its outback, or for its antipodean peoples, indigenous or immigrant.

However, the feature film *Black Robe* became the first Australian-Canadian co-production and, under the terms of the new official co-production guidelines, did offer scope for Australian creative input — this is actually a minimum percentage, calculated in terms of numbers of cast and crew to match capital investment.

This article is concerned with the outcome of this particular co-operative effort, the feature film *Black Robe*, with a screenplay by a Canadian and directed by an Australian, photographed, designed and edited by Australians, acted by Canadians (and one or two Australians), and co-produced by Australian and Canadian interests. The focus is on the text itself, and on the terms which the text sets itself, and aspects of its critical reception in the local context. This is a review of the film from an Australian perspective.

Black Robe is a film with a clear line of descent from primary sources. The press kit gravely notes that it is based on the novel by Brian Moore (published 1985), which is itself based on the Jesuit document *Relations*, apparently the actual accounts sent by the early missionaries back to their superiors in France. Moore himself (who has written much for screen, including the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain*), wrote the script based on his book *Black Robe*.

The director is Australian Bruce Beresford, who has in recent years been busy directing film overseas. In the past, Beresford made a strong contribution to the revival of the Australian film industry in the 1970s, with credits including *Breaker Morant* (1978) and *The Getting of Wisdom* (1976), and is now working in the international production context.



*Lothaire Bluteau as
Father Laforgue*

"I was made doubly aware of the strange and gripping tragedy that occurred when the Indian belief in a world of night and in the power of dreams clashed with the Jesuits' preachments of Christianity and a Paradise after death ... each of these beliefs inspired in the other fear, hostility and despair, which would later result in the destruction and abandonment of the Jesuit missions, and the conquest of the Huron people by the Iroquois, their deadly enemy."

Brian Moore, from the introduction to his novel *Black Robe*, 1985

Black Robe begins in the year 1634. Father Laforgue, a French Jesuit priest, recently arrived in Quebec (New France), sets off on a journey 1,500 miles upriver to a desolate mission outpost. The journey is hard and grim, but he reaches his destination eventually, though the Algonquin Indian group who guide him are almost all killed. His travel companion and interpreter decides to let the priest complete his journey alone while he himself stays with the young Indian woman still left alive.

It is clear that the filmmakers took great trouble over authenticity. We are informed that plates, implements, maps, canoes and weapons were made or built to represent historical detail with absolutely meticulous accuracy. Clockmakers and armourers were enlisted to recreate timepieces and period dress; costume makers hand-sewed decorations of chicken and fish bone, porcupine quills and feathers to Indian clothes. And certainly, in this respect, *Black Robe* as an historical period film is very distinguished. In scene after scene the *mise-en-scène* is brimming with detail — from the actors' costumes, to the tobacco leaves hanging from the rafters to dry, and pumpkins strewn around the floors of smoky interiors, to the wooden constructions of the Indian settlements themselves — and these representations of seventeenth century Indian life offer the viewer images of considerable visual pleasure. *Black Robe* is not unlike the good documentary with revelatory images of an unfamiliar time and space.

But beyond these naturalistic surfaces, *Black Robe* falls short, far short of the expectations one has of a film about European incursion into the new world territories. This is a text totally without reflexivity or irony. As a vision of the traditional clash of cultures in times past, *Black Robe* is still pegged to the structures of old, to the stereotypes which inhabit the diegetic world of the western. Indeed, it operates as a classic text of the western genre: lone stranger arrives in isolated community, sets its troubles to right, then moves on.

A film comparable with *Black Robe* is another western, Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves*. For all its flaws, and there are a number, that film at least offered its audiences the hint that it acknowledged its generic predecessors: the genre western with its formulaic last-minute rescue, with its hackneyed use of familiar landscapes to describe the protagonist in characteristic low-angle shot of his figure foregrounded against a rugged and indomitable terrain.

In *Dances with Wolves* some postmodernist play can be detected that is wholly absent in *Black Robe*. Beresford seems to have dealt with his

material in an unreflective and unselfconscious way, with very traditional results. This western of the Canadian wilderness is a film more concerned with its historic credentials, with the material details of its cultural and social specificities, than it is with the context of its own production, with how it resonates with the contemporary audience, with what it has to say about contemporary issues of ethnicity and its representations.

At one point in *Black Robe*, Jesuit Father Laforgue (Lothaire Bluteau) falls into the arms of an Algonquin Indian and murmurs "I was lost". It is a situation triggered when Indian children had grabbed his wide black hat and tossed it around playfully. He had sat throughout their game showing forbearance, but not a lot of humanity. He then had to endure a harangue from Mestigoit, Indian man of magic, who screamed at him as at a demon while they were virtually nose to nose. It is too much for Laforgue and he strides off into the forest but soon becomes lost, his sense of direction confounded, his terror conveyed in camera whip pans 360 degrees around him as the way through the trees merges into a solid block of grey-green-brown, with no way through.

For a short while then, the priest is lost before being recovered by his Algonquin guides. With relief Laforgue drops briefly into Indian arms and it could have been a moment of power and irony, but this scene is not given any particular resonance, is not made to signify more broadly. The denotation remains literal, and Laforgue drops back in step with his Indian guides and masters. For the film, it represents a moment of missed opportunity, when the film might have commented on the arrogance of an outsider's presumption to show the way (to paradise) to a people with a sophisticated and long-standing spirituality and culture.

The film takes the view, which it asks its audience to corroborate, that the meagre humanity and bleak spirituality signified in the figure of Father Laforgue is something to admire. The majesty of the mountain wilderness that he enters imparts a dignity to his quest. This is achieved by numerous wide-angle and high-angle shots which lend a grandeur of epic proportions to the mission. The music also underscores this signification.

Why Bruce Beresford's realization of the screenplay allows the priest this dignity is puzzling. Other cinematic representations of white Europeans heading intrepidly deep into wilderness or jungle, like Herzog's *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, have quite properly documented their growing insanity.

But from beginning to end, Laforgue and his Christianity dominate the text with iconic centrality. A blank dark screen which opens *Black Robe* is in fact a freeze-frame in big close-up of the back of Laforgue's habit. It is set moving as the priest walks forward in front of the camera to occupy the centre of the frame and carry the narrative forward thereafter. In the final scene we are offered closure with an image in silhouette of the Christian cross, accompanied by that majestic music on the soundtrack. A classic resolution.

Early sequences in the film introduce the Algonquin Indian group who will guide the priest and his companion upriver. They are first seen transfixed in front of a ticking clock, "Captain Clock". (The West's technologies were so much more interesting than its religions.) It is an unfortunate beginning — an introductory scene which signifies and reproduces the long-established stereotype. As a scene to introduce Chomina and family (and Daniel to Chomina's beautiful daughter) it is not a good start in a text which purports to represent the Indians speaking their own language, inhabiting their own houses, wielding their own implements, and master in their own lands. To see them first in these circumstances, huddled around a chiming clock, is to position the spectator immediately by reactivating the stereotype.

Black Robe, like *Dances With Wolves*, for all its vaunted sensitivity to the issues of representation of ethnicity with strategies such as subtitling spoken Indian languages (not, incidentally, the Iroquois, Algonquin and Huron of the peoples depicted in the film, but the Cree and Mohawk languages; the Huron language is extinct) is yet another reworking of the traditional classic text. In terms of its construction, it is organized around the usual antinomies of the classic Western — nature/culture, white man/ Indian — with the lone individual set against the landscape, foregrounded, if not exactly in command.

From a technical point of view, the film is even sometimes clumsy in construction. Flashbacks to Laforgue's past in France arrive unheralded and abruptly in frame. One moment Laforgue and travel companions are settling down to sleep in a smoky tent and then the next, from an extreme high-angle position, we see him walking through a French cathedral to meet a ravaged mentor who looks as though his face was held down over a fire — "the Indians live in outer darkness" and "we must convert them" intones this grisly figure, "what more glorious task". If the link or motivation for the flashback is smoke, it is a tenuous connection.

Another awkwardly inserted flashback wrenches the spectator away from the wilderness, through time and space, to a musical recital. A

young woman is playing the clarinet before a small audience, among whom sits Laforgue, stonily impassive, while his mother whispers to him to take this young lady's potential as a prospective wife seriously. On another occasion the past is signalled with mother and son together in a city square (is it Rouen?) considering his imminent departure for New France, a route to certain death and aspirations of martyrdom. A red rose is left lying at the foot of a statue (is it Jeanne d'Arc?) signifying the weight of maternal and social expectations.

Although these flashback sequences are not intercut well into the text (How do we see them motivated? To whom are they ascribed?) they certainly have a place in the text. Why did young men like Laforgue take themselves off to North America and certain death? What motivated such extreme gestures of self-annihilation?

Dreams and the subjective point-of-view are similarly used to represent certain Indian realities. While Chomina sleeps one night he is troubled by a nightmare of a raven pecking at his own dead eye. The raven is "black robe", Chomina is later informed dispassionately, and he has foreseen his own death in which the priest will be instrumental. It is a glimpse of the future which has considerable diegetic power when the place of the dream is realized in actuality — but the vision of the "She Manitou", who arrives to take Chomina's spirit away, is an arbitrary inclusion left unexplained.

The documentary realism which reconstructs Algonquin and Iroquois life could have been accompanied by some investigation into the society and the culture which begat Jesuit fanaticism. But instead of focusing on the black robed priests who strode into the wilderness with such sense of purpose, the text is happy to trade in the usual currency of proud and misguided pioneering individuals and brutal Indians (in this case, the Iroquois).

The very prominence given the torture scenes and the inclusion of contrasting scenes of sexual intercourse between Indians and between young Daniel and his Indian lover underline "difference" in ways which will do nothing to subvert age-old stereotypes. The character of Daniel (the natural man who can adapt to Indian ways) and of Chomina (the gentle and principled Algonquin) and his family notwithstanding, the overriding impression in the film is of cultures implacably opposed, of values and beliefs that have "justifiably" been made to vanish.

Without any sense of irony, the final "water sorcery" scenes are conducted with Father Laforgue baptising a group of Huron Indians who are desperate to stop the spread of fatal disease in their settlement. This final and important sequence, resolution to all that has been

represented beforehand, is punctuated with a shot of the Christian cross and accompanied by an uplifting musical score, signifying that Christianity prevails.

The final words that screen over the last frames inform us that the Huron settlement was decimated and the Jesuit mission survived another fifteen years. This additional bit of text only serves to underscore the film's point: that the efforts of those black-robed figures were only a little short of heroic. The plight of the Indians is mere detail behind the foregrounded protagonist, in this instance, a pioneer priest.

Local reviewers have been generally respectful, sometimes very enthusiastic, with reviews declaring this a passionate and beautiful film, accomplished and enthralling. It was reviewed in the Cinema Papers film journal as a "visually stunning, bloody and relentless film that engrosses one to the point of believing there can be no other world [Kerr, 1992]". However, a review in the English film journal Sight and Sound suggests a more mordant view might have been taken overseas: for this critic, Bruce Beresford's Black Robe was played out at the "intersection of Boys' Own and National Geographic [Romney, 1992]".

Why have the critics and reviewers of Black Robe in the Australian context received this film so respectfully? Perhaps there is a general disinclination locally to attack a mechanism, the co-production agreement, which will help the Australian film industry survive. But the politics of this worthy but misguided venture Black Robe should not be allowed to pass without comment.

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