



NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

1251 Avenue of the Americas

New York, N.Y. 10020



THE STREET

(10:12 color) 16mm \$185 video \$150 rental \$20

AWARDS

Academy Award Nomination 1977

Chris Bronze Plaque, Columbus 1977

AFF Blue Ribbon, New York 1977

Gold Hugo, Chicago 1976

Grand Prix, Ottawa 1976

Etrog, Ontario 1976

Subject Areas:

Language Arts and Literature, Social Studies, Counselling and Psychology, Values and Religion.

Film Content:

Mordecai Richler's novel, "THE STREET," is a moving recollection of his childhood on St. Urbain Street, in the Jewish neighborhood of Montreal in the late Forties. Viewers may be familiar with this scene from **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz**, a 1974 film for which Richler wrote the screenplay. Duddy appears in "THE STREET" also, but only as the friend of the central character, Richler himself recalling the bittersweet experiences of his youth, and among them, the death of his grandma.

In the sweltering heat of summer, an old woman turns in her bed as her family waits for her to die. This drama is observed and painfully recorded by a young boy with little real feeling for the old woman whose sickbed is taking up a room promised to him. His mother works herself sick for the old woman, while his neglected father notes that the other children never even visit. The boy's street friends tell spooky stories of death rattles, of hair continuing to grow in the grave, while his older sister frustratingly plays the know-it-all. Dr. Katzman on his weekly visits predicts the imminent end, but it never comes. When her labors make the boy's mother ill, "baba's" other children move the old woman to a nursing home, but as soon as the mother is better, the dying woman is moved back. His father only

says "I knew it."

But finally the ordeal is over. Returning home from a ball game the boy finds the flat filled with mourning relatives and friends. His tearful mother gives him the ring bequeathed him by grandmother, as mourners bob in prayer over the body. That night, his sister reminds him he will now have his own room, but he's no longer as eager to take it as he was. As he tries to lose his fears in sleep, the teasing sister pulls a sheet over her head and mimics the old woman's greeting to the boy "Bouyo! Bouyo!"

Objectives:

1. To raise questions on the human experience of death by portraying a whole spectrum of reactions to the terminal illness of a close relative.
2. To experience an innovative form of animation, freely designed to generate narrative continuity and psychological mood by a flow of visual analogies.
3. To reflect on death from the viewpoint of a child who sees it as merely another adult mystery which baffles and frustrates.
4. To compare the Mordecai Richler original with its animated version, noting exclusions, changes in emphasis, tone and feeling appropriate to visual as opposed to verbal narrative.
5. To share a humorous, thoughtful visual comment on the death of a grandparent viewed from the perspective of a young boy.

Technique:

Caroline Leaf's animation effects a remarkable transformation of the Mordecai Richler story without losing its flavor or blunting its purpose. The events which required hundreds of written words are reduced to a flowing sequence of images loosely accompanied by snatches of dialogue and the sounds of St. Urbain Street. Unlike the story, which is filled with the irony of hindsight, the film is almost totally subjective, presenting its characters and actions from the 9-year-old boy's viewpoint. In scenes such as the wake, adults loom out of backgrounds and drift like gigantic floats across the screen, their rationalizations remaining hanging, unsupported in the spaces behind them.

The first effect of the tempera-and-oils-on-glass-animation is the compression of time and space characteristic of memories and of dreams. Actions flow from one center to another, with the spatial definition added later. Characters

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never appear identical in different scenes, and yet they are immediately recognizable. The mother's labors are condensed into a swirl of activity, going from mixing batter, to combing the daughter's hair, to washing floors and back with easy continuity. Changing perspectives communicate motion to the images within a static frame. The sister reaches down to pull her bedcovers over her, extinguishing the bedroom in the process. The boy's ballgame and return down the street has the impact of a vertiginous back zoom, tracking the youngster's progress home.

The fluid continuity of **The Street** goes deeper than style, originating in the medium itself. Caroline Leaf works with a water-based mixture of tempera colors and oils, on a small glass plate lighted from below. The luminosity of her figures depends on the thickness of the medium. They appear and disappear, are transformed into object or into one another, by an alternating overlay and erasure of images. Working directly under the camera as Caroline does, there is no room for error—one serious mistake and an entire sequence must be scrapped. On the other hand, this direct application leaves her animation free for spontaneity, and rich in creative detail. The imaginative end product is paid for dearly in the time and effort of the artist. **The Street** required a year and a half to complete just 10 minutes of poignant reflections on death and dying.

Themes:

The Street releases personal memories and deep feelings on the towering reality of death, emotions which begin in childhood. We are not **told** what the boy feels, but we experience it with him—the gasping, alien flesh of the dying woman, the frightening myths of his peers, and the unsatisfying words of consolation spoken by adults. We know the relationship of the strong, principled mother and the weak, vacillating father by the way they look and walk. The confusion of unexplained adult rituals make the wake a frightening experience. The one consoling exchange is shared by the doctor and the rabbi, who contrast the sunny day outside and the grief within—mixed feelings grouped by the doctor under "mysteries of the human heart." Ultimately, fear of the deceased is the last emotion remembered.

The Street needs no justification for viewing its serio-comic portrayal of life and death, youth and age, thought and feeling. These elements of the human condition are endlessly fascinating. At the same time, the film's transformation of the Richler story can serve English Literature and Language studies as a valuable cross media research. The ethnic flavor of the experience, the voiced cadences of resignation, the "consoling" clichés and the obligatory religious references, capture for Social Studies the Jewish culture of St. Urbain Street in the late Forties. A full range of attitudes toward death make the film a resource for counselling on this topic, whether from a religious or a secular viewpoint. Finally, the remarkable animation techniques will recommend the film for intensive analysis by film study and filmmaking classes.

Some of the film's potential in these diverse areas may be suggested by the discussion questions which follow.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How did **The Street** make you feel? Name the emotions evoked, and tell frankly how your own feelings about death and dying were reflected in the film.

2. Both short story and film tell their tale from the perspective of the 9-year-old boy. Describe scenes from the film which make this viewpoint evident.
3. Compare short story with film. Why were various elements left out? (recollections of the grandfather, the father's alienation, etc.). Why does the film end with the sister's scare-act instead of the mother's hysteria as in the novel? Take a short phrase from the story (Wake Scene—"the flat was clotted;" Sick Woman—"she became a condition in the house, something beyond hope or reproach. . .") and note how it generates a flowing sequence of visual images in the film.
4. The boy hates to kiss his grandma before going to school. What makes illness repellent to the young and healthy? Aside from obvious reasons, such as ugliness, odors, dependency, is this revulsion due to guilt over one's own good health?, frustration at our inability to help?, or the threat of mortality?
5. Did the adults help the boy understand death? Analyze some of their remarks: "She'll be better off, if you know what I mean." What of the paradox touched on by Dr. Katzman—a zest for life in the midst of death? Have you experienced this ambivalence?
6. Social anthropologist Margaret Mead has recently spoken in defense of grandparents as a positive force in the family, providing experience, stability, wisdom, a tie to past traditions, and a relief from parents. Does **The Street** reveal any such role played by the dying baba in the past?
7. Analyze the animation style of **The Street**. How do the figures, movements, and transitions reflect the medium—tempera and oils on glass? List the more striking transformations, such as the mother's domestic labors, the baba's return from the nursing home, the nurse's visit, etc.
8. Try to recall the snips of conversation which embroider the images, manifesting Richler's ear for poetry of the commonplace ("I'm a born loser!"), the child's mentality (who's getting married?), and the ethnic cadences of the characters' speech.
9. Does **The Street** portray life as mean, beautiful—or a combination of both? Answer concretely in terms of the characters: an old woman holding desperately onto life; a mother worn out in the care of the dying; a father who feels he has been cheated by life; young people impatient to get on with their lives; a street filled with the vitality of an ethnic group which has mastered the fine human art of survival.

Other works by Mordecai Richler:

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz—an ambitious young Jewish boy pushes and hustles his way through school and odd jobs, trying to make the big time in the movies.

CAROLINE LEAF FILMOGRAPHY

"PETER AND THE WOLF"

"ORFEO"

"HOW BEAVER STOLE FIRE"

"OWL WHO MARRIED A GOOSE"

"THE STREET"

Guide prepared by Dr. Peter P. Schillaci, consultant in educational media, and author of many books and articles on film and society.