

Time Is a Rabid Dog by A.S. Hamrah

The following article was originally published by The Baffler, January 13, 2022

In the forests and meadows of Quebec, or maybe in a city park, a feckless vagabond revolutionary (Maxim Gaudette) is criticized, berated, and implored by his sister (Larissa Corriveau), his wife (Évelyne Rompré), his mistress (Ève Duranceau), a tax collector (Kathleen Fortin), and a woman who he has robbed (Éléonore Loiselle)—all from at least six feet away.

Denis Côté's *Social Hygiene* is classical French theater, stripped down via Straub-Huillet, and then presented with Covid-era social-distance rules in place. Set in the present, the characters act and speak as though they inhabit a previous century. Dressed like they've been asked to pose for Manet and didn't have time to put the right outfit together, they declaim their dialogue in the manner of Jean-Pierre Léaud playing Saint-Just in *Weekend*.

Each scene in this excellent, amusing, and unexpected film is one shot long, with the actors placed a little too far from the camera, figures in a landscape. The film works because of how it looks. It's only seventy-six minutes long and beats *Malmkrog* at its own game, almost a parody of the Puiu film. But could either of these films have known the other existed? They occupy separate bubbles of oddball philosophical discourse. Côté has made over a dozen low-budget, semi-conceptual films in Canada since 2005 and shows no sign of letting up. Each of his movies is a bracing delight designed to perk up an audience by asking it to see and listen in some new way. Antonin (Gaudette), an irresponsible male id figure like in *Red Rocket*, has just as many self-justifications as Mikey Saber, though his are of a higher order. And he's fully clothed. Asked by his wife where he's been for two weeks, he tells her, "Time is a rabid dog." She replies that they need more structure in their lives. *Social Hygiene* has plenty of that. Filled with birdsong on the soundtrack, stitched together with fast tracking shots and whip pans, it's beautiful, too. ♦

Acropolis Cinema presents:



July 7, 2022 – 2220 Arts + Archives

 @AcropolisCinema  /AcropolisCinema  @acropoliscinema

www.acropoliscinema.com

ABOUT THE FILM

Antonin is a bit of a dandy. He has a way with words that could have made him a famous writer, but instead mostly serves to get him out of trouble. Torn between twin urges to be part of society and also to escape it, his charm and wit are put to the test by five women who are about to lose their patience with his live and let live attitude: his sister, his wife, the woman he desires, a tax collector and a victim of his mischief.

All of Denis Côté's films are unique, but *Social Hygiene*—co-winner of the Best Director prize in the Encounters section at the 2021 Berlinale—feels defiantly free, and bears testimony to the way in which the constraints of a pandemic can be the mother of invention when it comes to cinematic forms and storytelling. Côté's use of language is playful, unchained. And as he gradually homes in on his verbally jousting protagonists, one ponders the sheer joy of being given such an opportunity to explore the penetrating impact of diction and tonal shifts. In fact, the charismatic actors are also clearly relishing this socially hygienic reaffirming of a performing troupe's creative energy.

75 min. | Canada | 2021

En plein air by Jordan Cronk

The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 86, Spring 2021

Following a run of creative setbacks and course corrections, Denis Côté returns to magnificent form with *Hygiène sociale*, a piercingly funny and exquisitely shot work that finds the Québécois filmmaker casting a critical eye on the nature of his art and the era in which it is now being asked to thrive. No mere pandemic film (the script was largely written in 2015), Côté's latest instead turns our current circumstances into a means for reflection, analysis, and confrontation with the very tools and convictions that have made him into one of contemporary cinema's most prolific and unclassifiable directors. At a time when the very concepts of serious-minded filmmaking and theatrical exhibition are being called into question by streaming giants and IP managers with zero investment in the sustainability of the art form, Côté proposes that what's needed if the cinema is to survive is not a reckoning with the notion of what is or isn't a movie, but a re-engagement with the tenets of an author-driven cinema, achieved on its own unique terms.

A distinctly free and unburdened work, *Hygiène sociale* opens upon a pair of figures in a field engaged in an argument, framed from a distance and with a socially responsible 1.5 metres of space between them—a nod to both current realities and to the individualist ethos of Antonin (Maxim Gaudette), a hopelessly pretentious dandy who, we learn through the first of his many spiels, has removed himself from bourgeois society and

become a petty thief who lives in his friend's Volkswagen and showers in the municipal pool. Plagued, in his words, by a “deep moral fatigue,” Antonin is self-aware to a fault, a man of big ideas but scant ambition whose blinkered existence will be interrogated over the course of the film by five women: his disapproving sister Solveig (Larissa Corriveau); his “part-time” wife Eglantine (Evelyne Rompré); his two-timing lover Cassiopée (Eve Duranceau); a tax collector named Rose (Kathleen Fortin); and Aurore (Eleonore Loiselle), a mysterious victim of his half-hearted crimes. What these women have in common is a shared skepticism of Antonin's attitude and ideals: there isn't a hill he isn't willing to die on, something he proves time and again across a series of extended dialogue scenes that highlight the absurdities and anxieties of the modern condition.

Set entirely outdoors, *Hygiène sociale* is an exemplary *plein air* film, all rolling pastures and sun-dappled horizons. Capturing the Québec countryside in all its picturesque glory, Côté employs the largely static camera of his recent cinematographer of choice, François Messier-Rheault, allowing the environment to shape the essence of each tableau as much as the dialogue does, which is a kind of weather system in and of itself that proves as dense as it does humorous. To that end, the actors, all veterans of the stage and decked out in period-inappropriate costumes, orate with a theatrical flair from stock-still positions that heighten the delirious nature of the discussions, which careen from cynical social commentary (“Being poor is no longer fashionable”) to pseudo-intellectual nonsense (“But what would be the thoughts of a calf who looks at fireworks?”). Call it a Straubian comedy—that is, if Straub dropped the highbrow references to Pavese, Hölderlin, and Schoenberg and fully embraced the existential narcissism of post-millennial living.

Following combative encounters with the first four women, all of whom he manages to either stonewall or leave exasperated, Antonin meets his match in Aurore, a stylish young bohemian whose car he has unwittingly broken into. Before their climactic confrontation, Aurore is seen in documentary-style vignettes traversing the countryside in search of Antonin. When they finally meet, following a hypotonic interlude in which Aurore dances alone in the forest to Lebanon Hanover's darkwave anthem “Kiss Me Until My Lips Fall Off,” Antonin is visibly taken aback by Aurore's mix of working-class grit and academic brain power (as she explains, she studies theology by day while working at McDonald's on the weekends). As their conversation builds, the details of Antonin's failed attempt at making a film come to the fore, an unrealized dream that Aurore skewers with the same rhetorical wordplay (“Is imagining a film the same as making one?”) that Antonin has previously used to twist the logic of any given situation. With casual rigour and a clear love of language, Côté has, with *Hygiène sociale*, made a strikingly contemporary film that speaks to cinema as an art of classical distinction which, nonetheless, holds the power to transcend eras and project storytelling beyond the bounds of genre and psychology. ♦