

# Identifying with Last Franco-Ontarian despair

Carole Corbeil



What is it like to be an artist in a culture that is rapidly disappearing? Unfortunately, this is a question that is particularly pressing for Franco-Ontarian artists.

*Le Dernier des Franco-Ontariens*, a documentary that will be shown on TFO/TVO's *Le Grand Soir* next Thursday, is an affecting look at the plight of Franco-Ontarians, but it is also full of interesting and useful paradigms.

What we are talking about here is an existential crisis that is all the more poignant for having been so neglected by the general population — which, it seems, exhausts all its energy for things French through periodic tangos with Quebec.

While Franco-Ontarians are a minority culture, those of us who live in Toronto also have to admit that when the word minority comes up, it rarely conjures an image of Franco-Ontarians lost in an Anglo sea.

Now, I know that the documentary is in French, and that most people won't be able to tune in, but since it offers a rare perspective — Franco-Ontarian artists are not only overshadowed by Canadian and American culture, they also refuse any identification with Québécois culture — it's worth taking a look at the issues the documentary raises.

I haven't read the book — *Last Of The Franco-Ontarians* by Pierre Albert — that inspired scriptwriter Marie Cadieux and director Jean Marc Larivière to make this documentary, but there is something familiar about the despairing stance Albert takes. In this collection of short pieces published by Editions Prise de Parole, Albert is facing

writer's block, beset by a seemingly infinite number of doubts.

He doubts whether his community can survive today's unprecedented media assault; he doubts whether he as an artist can survive a further attrition of his audience. He wonders whether it is worth writing or singing if it is impossible to imagine anyone listening.

Because artists require audiences, they are always intensely committed to their community's survival.

Rather than having to live through the painful dissolution of his culture, Albert decides he would like to get the whole thing over with quickly. To this end, he declares himself the last of the Franco-Ontarians and, to mark the ending of his culture, pretends to organize a "grand gala, the last Franco-Ontarian show."

There's a lovely interlude when he goes around to bars, asking people whether they would come out and see a show of Franco-Ontarian artists, if it were the last one. Albert thinks he can break through his tribe's indifference by this threat of it being the last show ever. The people are simply confused by this strategy.

What we witness, in these bursts of verses, is Albert's sudden inability to

go on enduring the tension of being part of a minority, as well as his battle fatigue with fighting off extinction. His wanting to end it all is an impulse to create a catastrophe he can control, as opposed to experiencing the slow torture of being erased by the dominant culture.

As the Americanization of Canadian politics and institutions and culture becomes more and more pervasive, I've seen this impulse at work lots of times. Despair over political and public indifference to assimilation flips into an angry cry of: "Let's get this thing over with, let's just be done with it so we can stop the pain of caring."

It's interesting to see this impulse all dressed up and taken to the limit.

Even more fascinating is literary critic François Paré's intelligent response to Albert's work. Paré, whose book of cultural analysis, *Littératures de lexiguité*, won the Governor General's Award for non-fiction in 1993, doesn't like Albert's book, but he's quick to say that Albert has stated the problem correctly.

"Franco-Ontarian culture," he says in the documentary, "has for the last 25 years defined itself by imagining its own final catastrophe. It is different from Acadian culture because their catastrophe has already happened — in the 18th century — and they have simply carried on. But for us, our catastrophe is coming."

And yet Paré is looking to find some kind of hopefulness within Albert's apocalyptic vision.

"To be backed up against the wall is interesting," he says. "It forces us to

say interesting things.

"In the older cultures, literature is oriented toward time, toward eternity. It is studied by centuries. Here, however, we have been denied time, we do not have access to eternity. All we have is space and this space is often very reduced. It can be a village, or this valley in the region of Sudbury, or it can even be confined to even an imaginary space in one's own mind."

What Paré has come to realize is that, within the traditional definitions of culture and literature, this particular space, this sense of place, has been swept from our consciousness, has been devalued.

A sense of place has come to be considered shameful and déclassée, with

the little cultures always looking to the big cultures for their sense of eternity. For Paré, this orientation is a waste of time.

He also makes the point that while our civilization will spend millions of dollars on the conservation of certain insects, an entire culture can disappear without a hue or cry.

It is this indifference, he says, that threatens Franco-Ontarian culture. And yet, by the look and sound of the many artists who took part in this documentary, this culture is far from moribund.

Carole Corbeil is the author of "Voice-Over." Her column appears weekly.