

Quebec on Screen: Brian Moore's film adaptations of *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* and *Black Robe*

By Brian McIlroy

[This talk was delivered on June 4th, 2021 via zoom for a symposium based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, entitled "Brian Moore at 100." The artistic contribution of Irish-Canadian novelist and screenwriter, Brian Moore (1921-1999), was the topic of the symposium.]

Brian Moore was a prolific writer—many serious novels, a number of potboilers, short stories, screenplays, journalism. As far as I know he didn't try his hand at stage work or poetry. Nevertheless, even a casual glance at the two research collections of personal papers at the University of Calgary and

at the University of Texas, Austin tells us there are numerous ways to approach writing and thinking about this Northern Irish born author.

I first got interested in Brian Moore's work through reading Jack Foster's 1974 book *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction*. This was in the early 1980s when I was teaching in Lewes, near Brighton and about to set off for graduate study here at UBC. A year or two later, I ended up doing a directed reading course on Moore's novels with Jack, and a couple of publications in the late 1980s came out of them. I attended one of Brian Moore's readings from *Black Robe* in 1985 (I think) when he visited UBC. I think I was conscious he was born in the same year as my father –1921—and so in some ways he was a kind of literary father figure to me; he gave me insight into that generation's

concerns and the kinds of restrictions and difficulties that faced them. My own parents left school when they were 14 years old, and went straight to work. I did note by contrast that Brian Moore came from a privileged background but appeared to disappoint by not taking the academic route. But then again it allowed him to have a most interesting series of jobs in his twenties that would in various ways seep into his novels.

For sure, the notion of exile and displacement was mostly what I was attracted to, eventually becoming a new Canadian myself like Ginger Coffey. I was interested to know how others dealt with this struggle---the apparent freedom to reinvent yourself in a new country, and the pull of the culture and values of your birth country. I mention a few scenes below from *Ginger*

Coffey that encapsulate this but which do not make it into the film.

Of course, Brian Moore made a living from his writing and so he jumped at the chance to work for Hitchcock in 1965 for the film *Torn Curtain*, though his synopsis did not meet the approval of the director who wanted less character analysis and more humour and general sparkle. Moore was hired because he had proven commercial and critical success at detailing female characters. And he had just succeeded in his Ginger Coffey screenplay being produced in 1964. This is all true but it was a bad match of talents. Moore remained the official screenwriter credit on the film but other writers came into the picture to suit Hitchcock's whims. I'm not sure one can really call it a Brian Moore screenplay.

The two films that we can safely say show us Moore the screenwriter in full flow are *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* and *Black Robe*. Adapting one's own work for the screen is rather like having the opportunity to rethink the design of an art object that already exists in the world. One is usually forced to change, omit and conflate elements, but also add for reasons of continuity. But most of all, one must come to some compromise about third and first person handling of point of view. Stream of consciousness or internal thinking of a character is difficult to convey clearly on film, and an overuse of voice-over and static shots simply produce cinematic problems for the conventional audience who seek change and development via moving-pictures. It's why adaptations of James Joyce are challenging, though John Huston's 1987

version of the short story, "The Dead" is a noble and notable exception.

There have been two interesting biographies of Moore by Denis Sampson and Patricia Craig. I confess I am more familiar with Sampson's unauthorized work, but both seem to agree if I remember correctly that his childhood and teenage years were imbued with a kind of Edwardian stuffiness. He certainly seemed to hate St. Malachy's. Sampson recalled his visit there to look at Moore's school records, and it was clear the custodian did not particularly value this alumnus. He had gone against the tribe. Then again, he was a privileged child who seemed to have had work choices. His contemporaries were often not so lucky, so in this sense there's nothing remarkable about a middle-class kid wanting to be independent and to be a

writer. What's commendable about Brian Moore is his devotion to the task. Tongue-in-cheek reviewers often referred to Moore's personal life with second wife Jean as almost monastic. For thirty years, he seemed to live a fairly simple life on the Pacific coast.

For sure, Moore was attracted to faith (even if he did not have any himself as far as I can tell), the idea that human beings can dedicate their lives to difficult circumstances. I was always somewhat afraid as a child and later I had perverse admiration for those zealots who stood in the main street encased in sandwich boards declaring sinners and unbelievers would suffer in hell. I suspect Moore also had a perverse admiration around religion or belief, even if outside his novel writing he might consider such devotion as slightly mad. And yet, there is always

something journalistic about Moore's fiction—his writing is often flat and unadorned, which suits his pessimistic view of the world and how people behave within it.

Let me come back to *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*. There's one small scene in the novel that doesn't make it into the film. It shows Ginger's decency in its external actions—he delivers a paycheque to an ailing old proof-reader at his rented apartment. Moore uses this scene to allow Ginger to see that he is nobody special, as this elderly man was from Donegal, had spent decades in Canada, had not made it big, and would die alone, mostly forgotten. It galvanizes Ginger in the novel to make the best of his limited circumstances. I think it's a very authentic scene and is omitted from the film I think because it would hold up the narrative, undermine Robert Shaw's Ginger's

general vacuous optimism which—nonetheless-- endears him to us.

Another aspect that is omitted is how he handles shame and humiliation. In the novel, there is a scene when he is delivering diapers and recognises an Irish woman with whom he had danced years before back in Ireland. Both of them pretend not to know each-other while knowing both have recognised each other. The new country and the old country must not be allowed to intersect overtly and complicate matters.

There's no question that the screenplay for *Ginger Coffey* is much tamer than the novel. Ginger is quick to use his fists in the novel and he makes aggressive unwanted sexual advances towards his wife during their separation. Neither of these

behaviours make it into the film. Both would make Ginger dislikable since he is, in the form of Robert Shaw, physically imposing, a feature Stephen Spielberg recognised in casting him as white shark hunter Captain Quint in *Jaws* in 1975. He also played a mobster in *The Sting* in 1973. Interestingly, Shaw saw this role as Ginger as his favourite, perhaps because it demanded a vulnerability missing or not needed in many of his roles. He was also acting with his wife Mary Ure. Sadly, both of them died young in the 1970s.

The film has a special place in the history of Canadian cinema. Before the late 1960s, there was little public money for Canadian fiction filmmaking. Documentary via the National Film Board set up by the Scot John Grierson in 1939 continued to be the main route for film art. Brian Moore was the beneficiary of

a change in attitude, in the sense that Ottawa based commercial producer Budge Crawley decided to take on a fiction film, though typical for the period he hired an American director Irvin Kershner, an American producer Leon Roth, a Brazilian composer Bernardo Segall , and an Israeli cinematographer Manny Wynn. Robert Shaw was English; Mary Ure Scottish. The Irish actor Liam Redmond plays the Scottish newspaper editor McGregor. An authentic Irish-Canadian cinema cannot really be said to exist. A few films emerging from Newfoundland might make a case based on the accent alone.

I would imagine Brian Moore was familiar with the “angry young man” plays and films in England in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and one could make a case that Ginger Coffey is a

study of working-class male angst about their place in the world. Class issues do seem to dominate Ginger's thinking about his past—always being a glorified teaboy for someone else's operation. But I don't think Moore has the political interest at this point in his writing career to go down a class analysis; rather, he seems much more interested in individual character, whereas Hitchcock by contrast was more interested in broad strokes and plot. Reading the novel, one is transported into a late 1950s culture, when it was difficult to get a simple divorce without proof of what was apparently then called "matrimonial fault"—this explains why we have Ginger almost connive with his wife's new lover to be a cheating guilty party, an aspect omitted from the film.

Hilariously, for those of us who have spent time in Montreal in the winter a few reviews of the film from sunny California comment on the fact that while the film is a well-paced drama, its location shots of Montreal does not endear one to the city.

It is actually this realism which allowed the film to have Canadian approval. As he walks the cold streets of Montreal looking for a job, he treats himself to a gym workout in the YMCA. It's one of the few comforting location shots in the film, and one can't help but feel Moore was looking for a space that Ginger could be relaxed in—outside of a drinking establishment—and it's interesting the writer finds it within a broadly Christian association. It speaks in a way to that endless search for a secular faith in Moore's novels, a reason other than religion to dictate behaviour.

At the end of the day, Moore opts to keep the viewer in the present of freezing Montreal. Though this may have been a simple budgetary restriction, there are no flashbacks to Ireland to help the audience understand his culture. In a sense, this is typical Moore, who is generally wary of sentimentality or anything that might invoke it. The past is a different country for Moore, but there's no sense it was a better place to be in. The novel ends with a kind of homily, a kind of secular spiritualism: to be focused on what is possible and make the best of it. And be satisfied with dissatisfaction, in a sense. The film ends with a reconciliation of sorts as well, though it is less clear if Ginger's marriage will be restored. That they are on honest speaking terms is a success in Moore's world.

Another European entering what it termed Quebec is the subject of Moore's mature work *Black Robe* published in 1985 and the film version directed by Australian Bruce Beresford in 1991. In a Canadian context, this was a very successful film, a co-production with Australia that won Genies (the Canadian equivalent of Oscars and Baftas) for Moore for adapted screenplay, for the Canadian and Australian co-producers, the Canadian actor August Schellenberg who plays the Algonkian Chomina and for Australians director Beresford and cinematographer Peter James.

As Beresford has implied, one can view the idea of a French Jesuit entering this land to convert first nations people as outlandish, courageous and as dangerous as being an astronaut on early space travels. It often was a one-way mission. Pictures

of Father Brebeuf being skinned alive and martyred still hang in Montreal churches. It's no surprise that Moore would see an inherent drama within this clash of cultures, of the extent to which missionaries for Roman Catholicism sought to dominate what they viewed as the new world. In the novel, Moore seems to enjoy suggesting that the French Huguenots were the first among the settlers to adopt native ways. Another reason for the Jesuits to hate Protestantism!

Given the current moment of reinvigorated attention to indigenous issues, the film is certainly years ahead of its time, even if we just noted the fact that Cree, Algonkian and Mohawk languages are spoken in the film with English subtitles.

Inconsistently, it is the French settlers and Jesuits who speak in English. A well-known Quebecois actor Lothaire Bluteau takes

the lead Jesuit role of Father Laforgue. Supporting actor Schellenberg was part Mohawk, and so there is an attempt at authenticity. It's just a fact of life that these issues are important when dealing with what Mordecai Richler used to call—controversially of course-- “defeated peoples”. By contrast, no-one was concerned at the lack of casting Irish people to play Irish roles in *Ginger Coffey*.

As in the novel, there are flashbacks this time to 17th century France, illustrating the huge gulf in culture and society between the Quebec settlement of the 1630s with that of Rouen, France, pointedly the setting of the martyrdom of Joan of Arc. It's as if Moore is fully aware that he needs some background to explain why someone would dedicate their life to one of extreme hardship. The stakes have to be high, and saving souls for

heaven, I assume, was then the highest of all callings for Christians. The immense personal sacrifice for an abstract idea is, in some ways, anti-human---the inability as a heterosexual man to be in a full earthly relationship with a woman, and to have revulsion at his own bodily needs, is perverse to both readers and viewers. He can only be a sexual voyeur of his companion Daniel's sexual activity. And he is overwhelmed with self-loathing and guilt at various points in the narrative.

In some respects, the film works better than the novel. The amazing cinematography brings out the majesty of the landscape, and the fear of the unknown. Father Laforgue knows he will probably die in this land that is not his own, and the image of the black robe in this environment is such an incongruous one.

As with most of Moore's novels, the issue of displacement is front and centre, and this is what is conveyed by the screenplay of *Black Robe*—whether it be the scene of the mechanical clock wowing the first nation community, or the apparent magic of writing and reading, or, the elephant in the room—that sexual desires and needs often rip apart any belief system. That there is a war, of sorts, between the intellectual and the physical needs of the human being. I think Moore was very interested in simply pointing out this contradiction. And yet, he “saves” Father Laforgue—who does the right thing by Catholicism—he is selfless and seeks to save souls despite his abhorrence of his living conditions and inevitable banal fate. In such an acceptance of one's weakness and one's decisions, Moore finds the only possible human dignity. And it ultimately demands our empathy if not agreement.