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Borderline

# Over the Borderline

Melora Koepke

*International craze finally reaches English Canada with this subtitled made-in-Quebec movie*

The fact that Montreal writer Marie-Sissi Labrèche's early novels have never been published in English is an odd omission by anglo-Canadian publishing houses - weirder still considering these particularly Montreal-flavoured books, *Borderline* (2000) and *La Brèche* (2002), are cult classics in their German, Greek, Russian and Dutch editions. So it's especially good news that Lyne Charlebois's first feature, *Borderline*, will be released with English subtitles alongside the French version, so anglophones will finally have a chance to meet **Emilie-Kiki Labrèche (Isabelle Blais)**, *Borderline*'s protagonist, for a rapprochement of solitudes. Not linguistic solitudes, mind you - because the indelible Kiki, after all, represents no one but herself. But, as director Charlebois points out, Kiki's personal demons and her struggles to surmount them are both utterly individual and universal in their appeal.

"I was so lucky to get these gifts: to do a feature, first of all, and that it was this subject especially," says Charlebois, a prolific director of short films, TV shows (*Nos étés*, *Tabou*) and video-clips (for Lhasa, Céline, Ginette Reno), when she and Labrèche lunched with Hour last week. "It was so me, so my world. Because I recognize myself completely, and I think everybody can find a part of themselves in this movie. You don't have to be borderline crazy, or crazy, or have a crazy family. It's about loving yourself."

In other words, you don't have to be crazy to like this movie, but it helps. *Borderline*, the movie, a loose adaptation of Labrèche's two novels co-scripted by the author and Charlebois, follows Kiki during two periods in her life, as well as flashbacks to her childhood: first as a 20-year-old suicide-blonde with self-destructive sex, booze and rock'n'roll habits that aid and abet her avoidance of particular issues in her East End Montreal existence, including an institutionalized mother, a needy grandmother, an absent father, and the only real love relationship she's ever had, with her dog, Claude Viau; then at 30, when Kiki has much better hair, a budding career as a literary scholar and writer, and a dubiously improved love life: an affair with her much-older, very married literature prof, Tcheky (a magnificently perverse Jean-Hugues Anglade), a man who by his own admission isn't half of what she deserves. Mind you, as Kiki ruefully tells the other members of her Sexaholics Anonymous meeting, she still considers Claude Viau, her dog, to be her longest-standing emotional relationship.

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photo: Jocelyn Michel



Indeed, though Kiki's indulgence in group talk therapy recalls many other cinematic visits to the edge of madness (*Fight Club*, anyone?), *Borderline*, because it is a movie about a woman and her excesses, must

walk its own borderline between maudlin and over-the-top. For the most part, Charlebois hits just the right note - Kiki is pathetic, yet strong and smart enough to keep out affection. This is largely thanks to Isabelle Blais's perfectly measured performance as a woman who's learning her own limits while showing the world what may be way, way too much skin.

Nudity, both of the emotional and physical sort, is one of the main metaphors in *Borderline* - showing skin is one of Charlebois's central techniques in her task of bringing Kiki's interior struggles into view, and the actual screen time devoted to Blais's character à poil is definitely a marquee feature of the film.

According to Labrèche, *Borderline's* richness of visual themes, and its particularly blunt and effective approach to tits and ass, is a function of the collaboration between her and Charlebois.

"I wanted to transfer my universe, my books, to the screen, but many of the images were Lyne's," she says. "The books are inspired in part by my life - I call it 'auto-fiction,' because the character is me but not all me. But for the movie, my books were transformed into an open act of creation: We fished around in my life, Lyne's life, and the actors also brought their own contributions.

"Hell, I barely even came on set," she adds, grinning. "I was too freaked out by the very fact that these were my words, made into images - I showed up to a shooting, and just saw a no-parking sign with the words 'Tournage *Borderline*' in the streets, and I wanted to run back home and watch Canal Vie from under the covers of my own bed!"

### ***Borderline***

ooo

### **Introducing Isabelle Blais**

*Living proof that it's better to be smart than lucky*

It would be unfair to say that Isabelle Blais's star is rising, because really, it has been shining bright for quite a while. In several recent Quebec films, Blais's small but crucial roles have measured the emotional thrust of the whole movie. As Katherine in Ricardo Trogi's *Québec-Montréal*, she played an office femme fatale who effortlessly deflects a horny co-worker's passive-aggressive seduction attempts. And that's her in *Les Invasions barbares*, as daughter of dying Remy (Remy Girard) who, via scrambled videophone and in two brief scenes, distills the very essence of Arcand's ruefulness. The woman has a way about her.

As Kiki in *Borderline*, however, the 33-year-old Trois-Rivières-born Blais does more than accent the action: She is the action. As two very different versions of the same woman, at 20 or 30 years old, and very often in the nude. Blais is about to become a leading lady in the classic sense, as well as a thinking-person's sex symbol of a sort rarely seen around here.

At 20, Kiki, an aspiring writer, battles her own very prevalent demons in-your-face - she's a blackout drunk and sex addict who masks her craving for affection in the most obvious ways. But at 30, Kiki has grown beyond her attention-getting party antics and trashy couture, though her need for love still manifests itself just below the surface of her skin. But for Blais, who shared a plate of cretons with Hour before an all-day rehearsal at TNM last week, risk-taking is the name of the game.

"It doesn't really appeal to me to do [mainstream, safe roles]," she said. "I just realized - except for *Les Invasions barbares*, every movie I've done has been a first feature!"

Indeed, you'll almost never see Blais in an uninteresting movie - which is saying something indeed in the cinematic climate in which we live, where every adventurous project is something of a rarity.

"I had an interview for [Karine Vanasse's role in *Séraphin: Un homme et son péché*], but I didn't go," she says. "I knew it was great character, but it's just not the type of movie I go for. As actors, we say, 'Oh yeah, we make choices,' but not really, because at the beginning you're not really choosing, you're taking what you get. I don't want to do that, to be [a vedette]. I don't want to do [ads]."

"I guess I'm really lucky, because I have made some choices - I had maybe two or three offers that I refused this year, because I'm not in a hurry to do everything, play everything. Maybe it's because through my music, I feel like I always have a creative outlet. [In addition to her prolific stage and screen work, Blais is the lead singer and lyricist for her band, *Caiman Fu*.] I need to have a creative part of me, not just interpretation, playing roles written by other people, but to create something A to Z."

As Kiki, Blais was subjected to a plethora of difficult, uncomfortable scenarios, including several scenes of simulated oral sex and one blackout-drunk partial striptease. But like her character, Blais felt that the peeler number was less difficult than a scene of tender lovemaking Kiki experiences a decade later.

"That scene was the hardest for me," she says. "Because it was not only mechanical, as in, 'We're fucking in this or that position, let's go,' it involved a lot of emotion as well... the party scene was easier."

"It's kind of weird - right before we did this scene, I really pumped myself up. After, I don't really remember it. I was so high on adrenaline, I just went for it, I turned the switch off and just did it. It was so trash, and the energy was easier than to have to feel really vulnerable."

"I was really concerned to get the dosage right - what's enough, what's too much? The striptease when she's 20, it's not subtle and she's pathetic. It's not the nudity you see in that scene, it's more, 'Wow, poor girl' than 'Oh, did you see her breasts?'"

I say, maybe not.

Blais laughs, and shrugs.

"Well, that's good, that's fine too. Why not? There are definitely worse things than that."



**members' comments**

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### Seriously

Thanks for reminding everyone that in her all too brief appearance in the transcendent Les Invasions Barbares that Isabelle Blais had the audience enraptured and in tears with her video message to Remy. One of the truly great and intriguing actresses that this great province has to offer. I look forward to seeing Borderline and what sounds like a very brave performance. Also it was nice to see this lovely actress grace your cover!

[Reuven De Souza](#)

February 11th, 2008

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