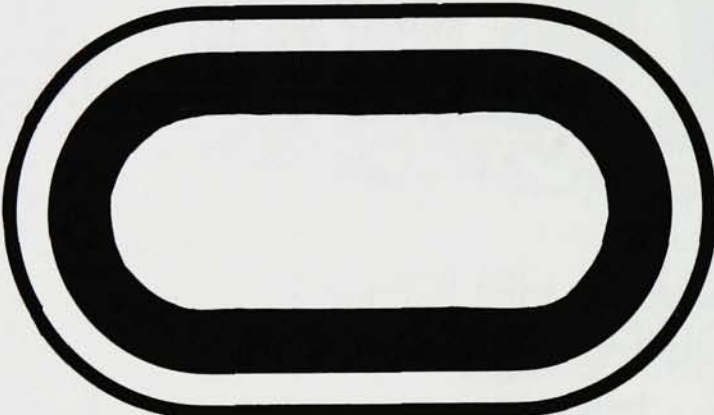


Vidéo

graphe



by Kirwan Cox

It is a rare experience to see the future. I saw it in a converted fur store in downtown Montréal under the name Videographe. Videographe is a videotape production centre, a video-theatre, a technical research laboratory, and a free video distribution service. More than that, it is complete and free access to the half inch videotape medium for anyone with a good idea and a desire to realize that idea — no experience necessary.

Videographe is sandwiched like a time machine on Rue St-Denis between two museums (the St-Denis Cinéma and the Cinémathèque québécoise) that seem to hold artifacts of a golden age passing. One can easily imagine the fascination of the nickelodeon or kinoscope in their time by walking into the storefront Videographe.

There is a sense of energy and excitement when people are participating and creating their environment rather than being mystified and carried along by it. That excitement is visible 24 hours 7 days a week in the faces of the young people editing tapes, looking into monitors, seeing themselves alive. Everyone at Videographe has that excitement and sense of accomplishment.

It all began last November when the National Film Board's French counterpart to the Challenge for Change program, Société Nouvelle, approved Robert Forget's idea. He wanted to increase public access to media by creating an open resource centre that people could come to rather than selecting groups and going to them as Challenge for Change does.

Forget is a 34 year old biologist with a passion for technical as well as social innovation. He has been with the French section of the National Film Board since 1965 as both an executive producer and director of educational film.

"The project", Forget says, "began by trying to evaluate the reasons which limited people's access to media. The main

reason was expense, so we adopted a format that was cheap and universal — half inch videotape." However, this medium is still technically less advanced than inch or two inch videotape thus Videographe was designed as a technical laboratory.

"A project of the size of Videographe was needed before we could break through with technical research. Now 12 per cent of the budget of Videographe is being spent on just that. Equipment modifications which allow closer editing and more flexible sound mixing.

"Still it is difficult to get access to technical information and technicians. Unfortunately most of the technicians at the NFB are only interested in keeping the machines running and not increasing quality control. They think we are playing with toys.

"We can push the medium. We have solved the editing problem and we will get colour and larger screens by projection in a few months. There is a video projection system with a 100 inch base now."

Improving the quality of the machines was one problem and improving the quality of production was another.

"We found that quality of video production was related to distribution. If there is no audience people don't do their best. So we tried to break the vicious circle by developing distribution to build higher motivation. The quality of production increases through feedback from the public to the video producers."

Videographe distributes tapes throughout Québec to universities, cegeps, cultural centres, community television, anywhere that asks. All the tape consumer need do is send Videographe a blank tape with a request for a certain program from their catalogue. Videographe makes a copy and sends it back without charge.

"At present we have 50 finished productions and 40 works

in progress. They range from four minutes to one hour and there is one 90 minute videofeature in production. We have 200 tapes in circulation at 60 different places in Québec. People across the province also send us their own productions. People using video are production oriented rather than only consumer oriented like users of film seem to be."

Forget says the only limitation to using Videographe is to have a good idea. There is a committee that decides which ideas are good.

"We take the cultural approach and are completely open about projects. There are no ideological or social prerequisites. You have to prime the pump to start it operating. For this pump the water is *content*. I wouldn't care if a group's initial VTR experience is gained through producing a fairy tale. As people become more competent they will become a resource for their community. But first they must gain expertise and learn to think for themselves."

If the committee approves an idea, the project is given a budget which includes the use of a Sony portapak, free tapes, and a free poster after the tape is finished. Videographe teaches the producer-to-be how to use the equipment and the equipment always seems to be in use. The editing modules are booked 24 hours a day days in advance. The portapaks are out god-sometimes-doesn't-know-where.

The finished tapes cover a wide range of subjects both in drama and documentary style about the things that concern the producer who is typically a young Québécois. These concerns range from the predictable pollution to Pierre Vallières working in Mont-Laurier, the October crisis and the FLQ, hitch-hiking, a pantomime show, a suicide fantasy, the problems the new airport is causing at St-Scholastique, and on and on.

The producer of the completed videotape or a friend designs a poster which videographe prints and distributes. Most of the posters have the beautiful simplicity of children's art and reveal the essence of each tape with much greater clarity than the usually pretentious commercial film posters. An evening is then reserved at the video-theatre and newspaper ads are placed.

The Montréal storefront which houses the studio.

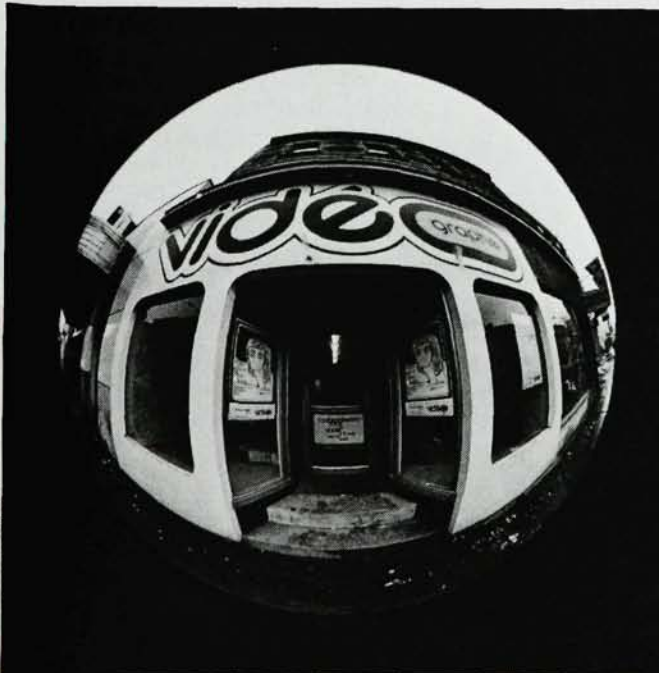


photo: Charles Binamé



Robert Forget, director of Videographe.

The theatre is a large room at Videographe with six 24" monitors suspended in a tight circle from the centre of the ceiling. One hundred and twenty seats are arranged in four rows around the edge of the room facing each monitor. Admission to the theatre is free and every seat is usually taken at the nightly shows. After the program the audience and producer talk, criticize, and learn more about each other in a process that sometimes lasts for hours.

The tape is then placed in the catalogue and stored at Videographe. Anyone can come in off the street at any hour of the day or night to see the production of his choice on a monitor. Of course, he can also send in a blank tape for a free dupe.

The ripples from this experiment are spreading beyond Videographe's own facilities. Radio-Canada has produced several television programs about and with Videographe. Even the commercial French-language channel 10 presents Videographe productions and producers to its 350,000 viewers on a regular basis. O.R.T.F. has come from Paris to make a program on what Videographe is doing. Since Videographe operates in French, English Canada (with the understandable exception of the Challenge for Change newsletter) has completely ignored its existence.

Now that the National Film Board is transferring the better tapes into 16mm film for distribution to community groups, perhaps sub-titles are not far away. One tape that has been transferred is Lise Bélanger's *S'AIMER TOUTE UNE VIE*. This tape is about a woman who separates from her husband and must learn how to cope with a new life taking care of her children alone.

"In Chibougamou they videotaped the reaction to this tape and sent it to us. It was tremendous. People are making imaginative use of the tapes they ask us for."

In the future people will get a chance to make imaginative use of new animation equipment. Forget realizes that price and ease of use is crucial to accessibility. The more complex and expensive the medium, the farther away it is from the common man.

"We have designed a single frame animation videotape

machine that costs only \$1350. We are using the Sony 3650 with \$150 in new parts to create the animation system. One person can use it and it will provide four second continuous feedback. The operator will be learning by doing. We are not setting up an animation table because that specializes thinking into using cells, turning handles, and the like. With this it will be possible to reanimate people like McLaren does or provide instant rushes for film shoots without processing. Animation will be easy.

"To my knowledge the only other video animation machine is the Ampex HS-200 which nobody uses. It is a videodisk and computer that requires a \$65,000 colour camera with operator, the \$120,000 HS-200 with another operator, the 2 inch machine with another operator, and the disk only runs for 30 seconds.

Videographe is starting a new project in late September to try and reach people who don't come down to Rue St-Denis. The experiment is called Selectovision or perhaps more accurately, dial-a-tape. About 500 subscribers hooked into a smallcable system in the eastern townships outside Montréal will get a catalogue in the mail from Videographe. Then every day between 2 p.m. and 2 a.m. the subscriber will be able to select any program from the catalogue, telephone his selection to the cable station, and see it on his television set.

There will be two channels in use with a "tape jockey" and playlist on one channel in split screen (so he doesn't really need the catalogue to know what programs are available). The requested tapes will be played on the other channel. The viewer will be able to phone in his reaction to the programs and talk to the tape jockey.

What's next? Forget's eyes widen. "After this we might send mobile videotheques around from cable system to cable system. Soon there will be a UHF educational channel in Québec and with most of the technical problems solved the rest is just imagination."

The most amazing thing about Videographe is how so much imagination can cost so little money. The budget from Société Nouvelle for the first year of operation is \$200,000 or one modest feature film. This year \$35,000 went for equipment (including 8 portapaks, 4 editing modules, 6 monitors, and parts); \$25,000 for tape; \$25,000 for production expenses; \$30,000 for posters, ads, catalogues, mailing; \$10,000 to rent the fur store and fix it up; and \$80,000 to pay the people who make the imagination run smoothly.

They are Robert Forget, director; Jacques Benoit, Technical Director; Roselin Breton, administration; Monique Larocque, Program and Publicity; Jean-Pierre Masse, Coordinator of Production; and Pierre Devroede, Theatre and Print Service.

Videographe is a successful experiment, but it will remain in the future until there is a Videographe in every city in the country. The cost of such a network would be much less than the refitting of the HMCS Bonaventure and the benefit to all of us would be incomparably greater. ●

Kirwan Cox is chairman of the Board of Directors, Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, and President of the Great Canadian Moving Picture Company, established in Montréal for the purpose of privately producing Canadian motion pictures. He has been actively promoting the cause of Canadian films for a number of years.

The editing module at Vidéographe.



ZLOCZOW
Guy St-Onge, 1971
20 minutes

BSCQ-31672 **pour tous**

Existe-t-il d'autres valeurs que l'argent, le confort, la sécurité et la respectabilité?
C'est la constellation vue par son jeune auteur de dix-sept ans.
La ville est en proie à un développement désordonné, à la pollution sonore, visuelle et atmosphérique. Un matin, un travailleur-exemplaire, d'une mine désinvolté, est hanté par l'omniprésence de l'inquiétude et de l'angoisse, symbolisées ici par deux infirmiers anonymes, munis d'une civière. Ils le suivent continuellement, espérant le faire fléchir sous le flot grandissant de l'absurde de l'existence d'ÊTRE.



JE SUIS DE STE-SCHO
Henri Stadt, 1971
45 minutes

BSCQ-31677 **pour tous**

Sainte-Scholastique doit disparaître devant le prestigieux projet du futur aéroport international. Très sensible à la vie qui l'entoure, aux événements qui modèlent le destin du monde, Hector Gratton, soixante-dix ans, traduit tantôt avec douceur, tantôt avec violence sa perception devant l'anéantissement de son village natal.



ODE A LA JOIE
Richard Robesco, 1971
25 minutes

BSCQ-31671 **pour tous**

Un vieillard à qui les années commencent à peser repasse les principales étapes de sa vie. Une vie où les deuils n'ont pas été absents.
Il capte avec un rare bonheur l'unique et étincelante beauté de sa vie; son enfance à la campagne.
"A toi, les rêves de fée, et peut-être aussi le bonheur en pleine réalité."



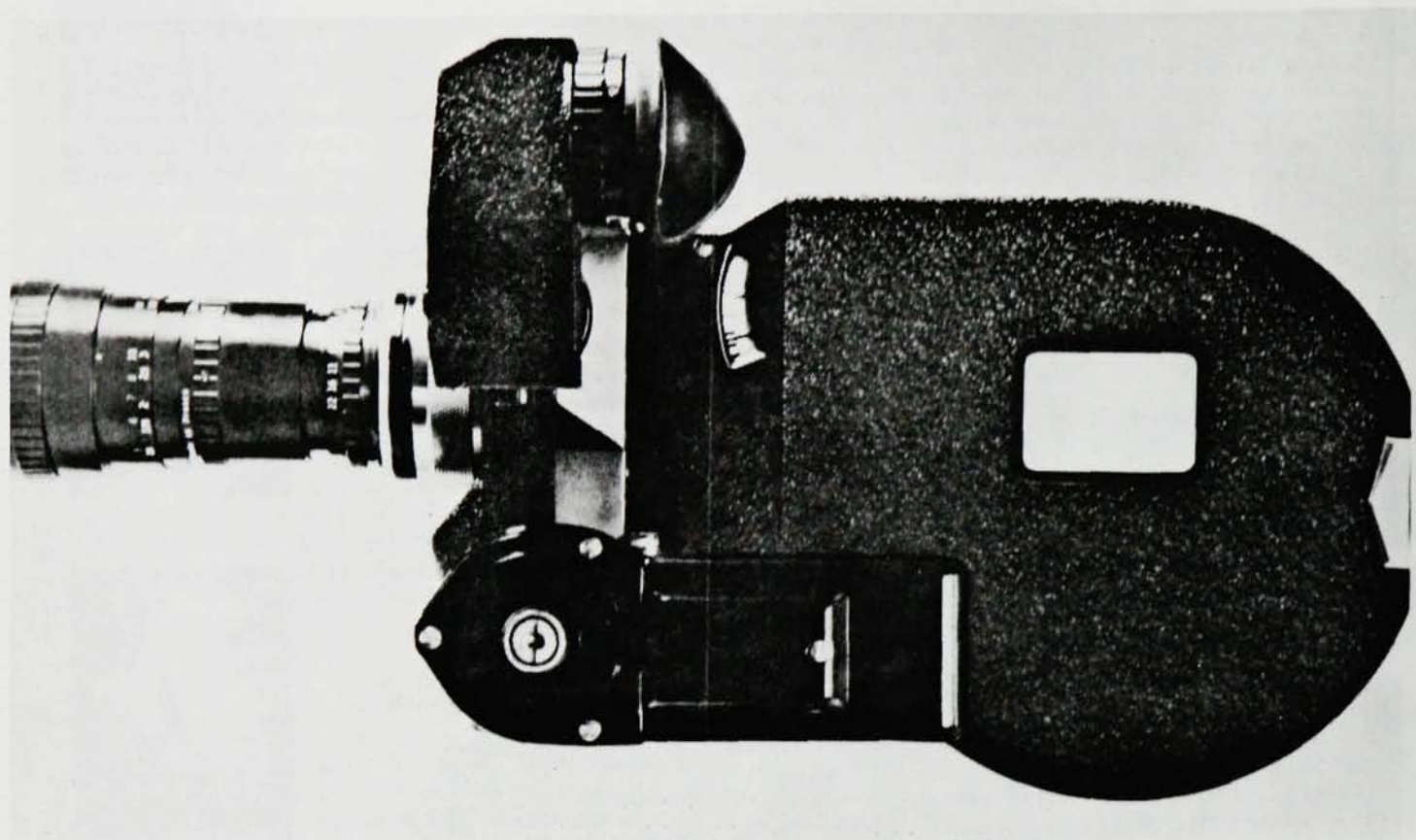
HITCH-HIKING
Frank Vitale, 1972
40 minutes

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