

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Jean-Pierre Lefebvre

by Peter Harcourt

Canadian Film Institute, Ottawa, 1981, 178 pages (\$7.95).

One of the happiest consequences of the Canadian Film Institute's stay of financial execution has been its publication of Peter Harcourt's long-awaited monograph on the work of Jean-Pierre Lefebvre. The book provides more than a simple elucidation of the work of a promising talent. In its own way, *Jean-Pierre Lefebvre* is something of an experiment in cross-cultural understand-

ing. Can English Canada's most consistently articulate film commentator and polemicist achieve a rapport with Quebec's most accomplished cinematic innovator? Or, can an author whose career began with a major survey of European cinema empathize with a director whose films have been more widely appreciated abroad than they have been in the culture next door?

Melodrama aside, Harcourt makes the confident—and accurate—assertion that Lefebvre is nothing less than the most important Canadian voice contributing to the international dialogue on the shape and direction of cinema.

There is no hesitation in describing Lefebvre as an artist with "the inventiveness of Godard, the directness of Rossellini, the complexity of Resnais, the humanity of Renoir and the formal rigour of Michael Snow..."

In making his case, Harcourt begins with a chronological discussion of each of Lefebvre's 18 films, from the director's only short, *L'Homoman* (1964) to his latest feature, *Avoir 16 ans*. There is also some discussion of unfinished projects, the most interesting of which appears to have been Lefebvre's collaboration with Michel Tremblay and André Brassard. (The film, *Backyard Theatre*, was to have recorded a "happening" staged by the casts of *Les belles soeurs* and *Demain matin, Montréal m'attend*. It was eventually finished by the NFB in a far less interesting manner).

Harcourt's critical penetration of the films is also chronological. In his first chapters, he provides detailed descriptions of the works (itself a virtue, given the difficulty in obtaining access to English versions of many of these films). At best he is speculative. More frequently, his commentary is a promise of criticism, an outline of subjects to be discussed at greater length as Lefebvre's career is presented to us.

By the end of that presentation, Harcourt's promise is, by and large, kept. He shares with us his excitement as, while watching *Le vieux pays* and *Avoir 16 ans*, his own understanding of the parameters of Lefebvre's sensibility develops. The list of opposing themes first drawn up in reference to *L'Homoman* no longer appears to be the handiwork of an auteurist functionary. Harcourt demonstrates the manner in which Lefebvre's work takes place between these polar opposites: winter and summer, the city and the country, the old and the new, Animus and Anima, authority and acceptance, duty and pleasure, war and love. Even better, the exercise comes alive with Harcourt's notation of the contradictions inherent in the very pursuit of these oppositions. He demonstrates the dialectics of a non-ordinaire Marxist, the poetry found in deliberately ugly images and the passionate commitment embedded in the apparent disinterest created by Lefebvre's distancing techniques.

Harcourt's analysis ends with the conclusion that there can be "no confident conclusion" concerning Lefebvre's films. The artist, not yet forty, may have provided us with "masterpieces." But his work, as a whole, is still at a formative stage. "Lefebvre," Harcourt tells us, "thinks by filming and films by thinking."

Throughout the book, Harcourt is quick to acknowledge his own limitations. He does not consider his study of the films to be in any way complete. Moreover, as an anglophone, he doubts his ability to come to a decisive understanding of culture in Quebec. Characteristically, he presents us with sketches made by Lefebvre to illustrate the shapes of films. But he finds it difficult to integrate those shapes into his own

understanding of the works.

While appreciating the reasons for the author's hesitation in these areas, the reader may be forgiven for asking for clarification on some points. What, for instance, is the role of Marguerite Duparc, Lefebvre's long-time collaborator? Is she to Lefebvre what Danielle Huillet has been to Jean-Marie Straub? Is she a co-author? Strangely, the contributions of other collaborators (Marcel Sabourin, Mireille Amiel) are more fully documented.

By the same token, one could wish for more discussion of Lefebvre's interactions with the Canadian and Quebec film industries. There are some references to the difficulties encountered on certain projects, stories which appear more one-sided than they probably should. But there is no real documentation of, or speculation upon, the reasons for Lefebvre's continued ability to make the films he wants to make. How does he do it? More importantly, are his methods responsible for his aesthetic? Is he an anomaly, a tolerated poet? Or can his career provide a useful model for other filmmakers?

And some quibbles: the book could use a bibliography of writings by and about Lefebvre. After all, we have such thorough bibliographies of people about whom nothing interesting has ever been written. The book should, like all major studies, have an index.

And a compliment: to D. John Turner for his excellent detailed filmography.

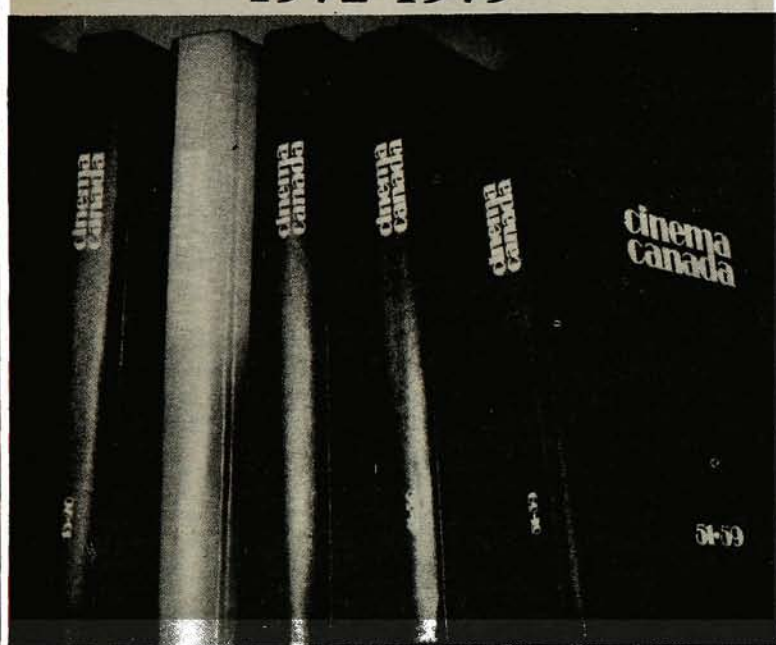
Finally, it may be said that it is in this, the sixth volume of its current series, that the CFI's film monograph format—a career summary followed by a lengthy interview—finally pays off. It is within the interview that the reader gets the fullest sense of Lefebvre as an artist, a thinker and a Québécois. Most revealing are Lefebvre's comments on his childhood, his introduction to Quebec culture and his relationship with his crew during the shooting of his films. On his part, Harcourt confronts Lefebvre with the conclusions that he has reached in the book's first section. Thankfully, their discussion goes beyond the blessing or condemning of any particular points made by the author.

Perhaps the most sanguine aspect of the interview—and the book as a whole—is the candour with which the two participants approach each other's endeavour. In recognition of that spirit, the interview is entitled, "A Conversation Between Jean-Pierre Harcourt and John Peter Lefebvre." Cute as that might seem, the title is justified. For the interviewer and his subject find a mutual language that goes beyond the Franglais in which the interview was conducted. Rather, that language is grounded in an understanding of the possibilities and perils of constructing cinematic articulation. Without that language it would be just as impossible for Lefebvre to produce his major oeuvre as it would be for Harcourt to provide this fine appreciation of it.

**Seth Feldman**

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