

Burden of dreams

Montreal has been described as the underground film capital of North America. Certainly the enthusiasm aroused by the 11th International Festival of New Cinema, held Oct. 29 - Nov. 7 attests to a demonstrable receptivity to non-mainstream film. But a festival remains a festival, the exhibitory high point of a long, hard road.

At the beginning of that road stands the lone filmmaker, burdened with dreams but without money or support; often with barely enough equipment. For a view from that end of the road, Emil Sher describes the creation of a new Montreal film co-op.

When immigrants first arrived in Montreal at the turn of the century with suitcases and dreams in hand, it was on the Main - St. Lawrence Boulevard - that many of them set up shop and replanted their roots. From grocers selling pickles out of wooden barrels to dry goods merchants hawking their wares, they flanked the sidewalks in a colorful blend of languages and lifestyles. So it seems appropriate that a group of young filmmakers who have joined forces to form a cooperative where diversity can thrive should choose to establish themselves on the Main. Nestled on top of a bakery, Main Film is a new co-op that serves as a resource center for those who want to pursue alternative filmmaking.

Main Film embodies the pluralism that characterizes the street on which it is housed. Comprised primarily of anglophones, the co-op has resisted any type of ideological or political slant. Like the multi-ethnic face of St. Lawrence that incorporates diversity into one of its greatest assets, Main Film members are encouraged to pursue and share their individual filmmaking styles while fortifying the collective as a whole.

"I don't think there's any real ideological slant that holds the thing together," says Jason Levy, who also sits on the production committee. "It's more practical considerations. The idea is more that people will be free to do what they want within the framework of us working together." Echoing this attitude, chairperson Mary Armstrong stresses that the only mold the co-op won't fit into is a commercial one. "Whether people want to make films that are politically important or art films, I don't think there's a real restriction, except that we don't want to compete with private industry. We want to make the equipment available for us to make the kind of films we want to make," she says.

In preparation for the first co-op films to be made, the question of creative control is a contentious issue that Main Film is grappling with in its formative stage. "We're really new," says Armstrong. "The production policy is new, the production committee is even newer and so, at this point, we've set some guidelines and we'll have to see what happens. We know one another. What we're asking from members who make a submission is for as much information as they can give us in terms of sources of funding. We're going to find out, given the scope of the project somebody has and the sources of funding they have, what degree of creative control they're going to have. We're going to have to play it by ear as we go along."

While it may be some time before the co-op's first film is screened, film buffs have not been left in the dark as to the varied filmmaking styles that one could expect to find at Main Film. Eleven short films directed by co-op members were shown to a full house at a one-night screening this fall at Montreal's Cinéma Parallèle. Among the films were Armstrong's *Everybody's Business*, a documentary on a Saskatchewan greenhouse cooperative run by people who are physically and mentally handicapped; *Cherries*, Robert Rayher's six-minute silent close-up of someone pitting cherries; Peter Sandmark's *Moebius Strip* and Dale Walsh's *À la ligne*, two animated films that are respectively conventional and experimental; and *Va t'incer l'oeil*, Geoff Bowie's film on male strippers that received a "special mention" at the 1981 Canadian Film Festival. Armstrong contends that the films reflect the diversity that's involved in the co-op. Vice-chairperson Marie Potvin attributes part of the success of the screening to a kind of aesthetics that correspond to the young generation. "The people in the co-operative represent a new generation whose formal ideas are different from those of the people who started making films ten years ago," she says. "Compared to what is made in Montreal generally, maybe our tendency is a little more experimental than most of the things that have been done."

The success of the fall screening and other ones that Main Film has held is indicative of the results it can achieve by virtue of its collective input. Armstrong laments the plight of the independent filmmaker who makes a film geared towards a certain audience, yet at the same time wants to expose the film to as large an audience as possible. Main

but it's an expressive sort of howl, and it's your howl.

Film your experiment in aural aesthetics, show it to me; and if not for the fact that I thought of it first, I'd give it a good review. For what I'm looking for in experimental film is something that's new, and something that works.

Robina Rose's *Nightshift* was the most noteworthy experiment that I saw. It was the film equivalent to Brian Eno's ambient music... by slowing the pace to that of a hotel attendant's night shift, she demonstrated that there is an attenuated impact to what stimuli the hotel guests' activities provide.

It may not sound like it, but it was a treat to the eyes, and the narratives embedded in the guests' activities were fascinating. Only one criticism. The attendant whose point of view we shared was an icon of complete passivity, the guests were very real people... there was a contradiction there that was more annoying than illuminating. Then again, it was a memorable image of the definitively alienated worker.

Secondary Current by Peter Rose was an arch experiment in using words on the screen and a soundtrack to demonstrate that there is a humanistic message to be derived from the fact that a universal language exists. It was also a pretty friendly, good-hearted film.

Michael Snow uses just letters and words on the screen in *So Is This*, so perhaps it is a purer experiment than *Secondary Current*. But I found Snow's film a lot less interesting; to be blunt, other than reviewing the state of affairs in semiotics, I don't know what the point of it was. Perhaps there was on the screen some nuance of a new notion about self-reflexive discourse, or the possibilities of the minimalist screen image. But I didn't see it.

Plowman's Lunch by Lawrence Weiner was a botched experiment in applying Godard's techniques to illuminating the semiotic investigations of a bunch of shallow Dutch punkers. It never had a chance of working, but amid the wreckage of the film there were some funny moments, and some tender ones.

Distance, by Jean van de Velde, was the strongest film in the realistic mode that I encountered at the Festival. Clever use of the subjective camera gets us into the skin of the protagonist, a filmmaker who compulsively uses the camera to distance himself from the world, but who is struggling to close that distance. The photography was excellent, the storyline tight as a drum. Perhaps the friend the protagonist spends so much time filming is more of an archetype than a real character, but then any more depth to him and we would have been distracted from the protagonist. In a milder form, it's the same kind of problem as in *Nightshift*.

Paul Morrissey's *Forty Deuce* was also outstanding, but I suspect the credit probably goes more to the off-Broadway play upon which the movie is based, and the cast who are remarkably convincing. With one classic film already to his credit (*Heat*), Morrissey's direction here is flawless. It's just that this tale of male prostitution in Manhattan doesn't call for the director to do much more than stand back and let the story and the cast do their stuff. Of course, displaying that kind of discretion is in itself no mean feat on the part of Morrissey.

Michael Oblowitz' *King Blank* wavers in and out of realism; sometimes wandering off-track into rock video flashiness, sometimes zeroing in relentlessly

to present à la Hitchcock the claustrophobia and terror of a borderline psychotic girl trapped in a relationship with a man who has been refused induction into the U.S. Army because he is completely mad.

Rosemary Hochschild gave an intriguing performance, and Oblowitz has some interesting scenes where the characters don't talk, or talk very little, even while the sound track has them pouring out a stream of words. It was fun seeing someone getting serious use out of horror-movie techniques, and Oblowitz showed a lot of technical skill. Still, he seems to have been aiming at skulls cracked with shock, really epic horror, and his story line was a little too confused for that. He can't expect us to put ourselves totally in the story when he isn't sure exactly what he thinks of his characters; that is, whether they're totally frightening, slightly ridiculous, or just good folks with big problems.

When I was little, my mother told me the story of the little Spartan boy who was so ashamed of being caught with a stolen fox under his cloak that he let it gnaw him to death rather than admit it was there. The story made several impressions on me; among them was the notion that if Spartan mothers went around telling their kids that the little boy was to be emulated, then there are definite limits to how well you can ever understand truly different cultures.

This by way of introducing a Vietnamese film called *Rencontre des Nuages et du Dragon*, by Lâm-Lê. A fable, realistically told, it tells the story of a magician who lives through the French and American occupations. It's in black and white, 33 minutes long, it leaves you marveling that out of such tragic events such a compelling tale can be woven. I don't know what I can add to that, since the central metaphor of the butterfly has a resonance I can only note without defining. In the same way, the acting style is pretty broad, in the manner of some Chinese films I've seen. It seemed like good acting to me.

Sayat Nova, Couleur de Grenade is another film I feel very cautious about, especially since its stately procession of stunning images finally drove me from the theater. It's a majestic film which tells the story of a famous Armenian bard who took refuge in a monastery, but I just wasn't up to the effort of watching it. Serguei Parajadnov, the Soviet director of the film, has tremendous visual power, and it's a film I want to see again. Parajadnov has suffered at the hands of the Soviet authorities; I signed the petition on his behalf, and I urge others to do so. I may have reservations about understanding other cultures, but Soviet paranoia and brutality is something I can grasp.

I caught a couple of documentaries at the Festival: Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* and Frederick Wiseman's *Model*, which were so perfect they leave me with nothing to say. It doesn't mean that I was wildly enthusiastic about either one; I wasn't; but they were both right out of the textbook on how to make a compelling documentary film. *Burden of Dreams* follows Werner Herzog through the trials and tribulations of making *Fitzcarraldo* in the Peruvian jungle, and it certainly underscores the vanity-to-the-point-of-madness involved in the project. There's a lovely shot that comes just after one of Herzog's more embarrassing ravings, when we see an insect struggling to carry a leaf that's just obviously too big for it to handle. *Model's* great strength is its exquisite

• The founding meeting of the Main Film Co-op in November, 1980

