



LÉONARD FOREST

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FRENCH PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE

Throughout its existence, the National Film Board has been treading the fine line between civil service and anarchy. Part of the reason that they have been able to turn out so many great films comes from the way in which they are organized. It comes in the long and winding procedure through which films get proposed or requested and then finally produced but the very bigness of the NFB is both its strength and its weakness. A brief visit to its hospital-like corridors will quickly impress even the most casual visitor with the enormous number of typewriters and adding machines clicking away versus the relatively few editing machines. And yet this top heavy bureaucracy, when it works well, can serve as an agent to help plug the talented filmmaker into what's happening and, at the same time, insulate him from the day to day vicissitudes of the producer/sponsor relationship. A model for the Film Board, indeed a model for creative activity within any bureaucratic structure is French Production and the newly appointed head of the French Programming Committee, Léonard Forest.

In politicized Québec, being a middleman between often overtly nationalistic filmmakers and an organization whose very mandate rubs against their grain, Forest himself has the temperament and background ideally suited to this delicate and often thankless job. Being an Acadian, he is in a better position than most to view each side with certain healthy detachment. At forty-six, he has worked at the Film Board since 1953 and has been involved as either writer or director in over a dozen first class productions. He is articulate and soft spoken, deflecting difficult or embarrassing questions with just the right combination of truth and diplomacy. His most recent experience has been with Société Nouvelle, where he worked with his fellow Acadians in the Maritimes, and his experience as a social animator is put to good use within the structure of the Board.

One of the most impressive aspects of the functioning of the French Programming committee is the way in which it operates. "The committee is a collective process involving filmmakers, producers and administrators", explains Forest. "I look on my job in terms of maximizing the flow of information. The process of decision-making, the way these decisions are made are vital parts of the collective process." And these aren't just words because there is something fundamentally different about the structure and spirit of the French committee particularly when compared with its English counterpart to maximize both the use of their limited resources and the flow of creative juices.

"Previously, we had a system which left a lot to arbitrary judgment. Someone in my position of the director of production or even a producer could decide that he didn't like a filmmaker and therefore reject his projects. Seven or eight years ago, things were reaching a very serious stage and it became evident that this authoritarian set-up must somehow be broken down. It was then that we evolved the idea of the program committee. It should involve elected filmmakers and representatives of the administration and distribution."

The idea of a program committee set up in this way, while relatively new to the English section, is somewhat of a tradition among French filmmakers. The most impressive aspect of the French unit is not so much its democratic nature

but the willingness of filmmakers to get involved in the sticky process of collective functioning. Filmmakers elected to the program committee must spend at least one day a week on its work, but they seem to do so willingly. "If you want to make a collective process work, it involves an awful lot of work on the part of a large number of individuals. Through the years, even before the establishment of our unit, French filmmakers have had a long tradition of demanding to be heard; to share in some decisions and to offer suggestions and advice. There is an awareness that after all, they are the people who are generating production."

One of the most difficult things for an outsider to understand is the apparent ability of French filmmakers to have this awareness of being part of a movement and still remain individuals in terms of their own creative function. But it is exactly this balance between private creativity and a sense of collective responsibility that has made the National Film Board the unique organization which it is.

"The most important factor in programming, apart from our mandate and our responsibility to the public, is the personal involvement and motivation of the filmmaker. From past experience, we have found that you can have loads of



Photo: Balazar

abstract intellectual material on a particular subject but it is not the kind of material from which a film can result. A film really gets made when some filmmaker wants to make it. A program committee can dream up all sorts of wonderful ideas for films but if there is no filmmaker around who wants to get personally involved in that project, the film won't get made.

It has now become accepted practice that the program committee is not interested in studying a film or program of films if there is not a filmmaker attached to it from the beginning. A producer, or even myself, the director of programming can, of course, in some ways initiate research in certain areas on the condition that we go through the regular process as quickly as possible — that we implicate a filmmaker as quickly as possible. And filmmakers, through the program committee, are not only involved in recommending individual films, but they also deal in long range planning and priorities into the kinds of films that we should be doing in the future."

To see this process in action, one need only look at the Language Drama Series. The Film Board was recently granted two million dollars from the Secretary of State to make a series of dramatic films to be used in language training. The English sector used its share of the money to produce five feature films and the results have been uneven. The French sector used the influx of this money to make a series of twenty short films and give young filmmakers a chance to experiment with the dramatic short format. Not only have the resulting films been excellent but twelve Québec filmmakers have been given a chance to prove themselves while the lucky few in the English unit were experienced filmmakers to start with. It is this collective consciousness which allows the French Unit to build up its creative resources and use its limited budgets to benefit the filmmaking community as a whole.

Because of its receptiveness, there is a close tie between French Production and outside industry. The result is a free flow back and forth between the two sectors and many directors from Carle and Arcand to Jutra have been able to use the NFB as a training ground to the mutual benefit of both parties. A full thirty per cent of French production is done by freelancers and in this way it is perhaps the French unit that best reflects Grierson's original founding idea of a National Film Board — not an establishment of filmmakers, but a small group of producers coordinating government film activities using the creative resources of independent filmmakers.

However, many films are being made. Forest estimates French production makes about 40 films per year — with workshop staff amounting to 75 to 80 and freelancers making about 30% of the films. Georges Dufaux, for example, whose two-hour documentary on the emergency ward of Montreal's Sacre Coeur Hospital, *A Votre Santé*, was recently televised, is now tackling a project on getting the elderly back into society. Another filmmaker is working on a film about schizophrenia which was approved after the committee discussed the idea for two and a half hours with the psychiatrist who will be the film's focus.

There aren't too many features in the offing, but one is being worked on by Clément Perron, (writer of *Mon Oncle Antoine*, writer-director of *Taureau*) which will evoke the period of the anticonscription movement in Quebec. Forest recalls Perron may have been too conscious of constrictions, "He came to us with what he thought was a completed script. The committee actually encouraged him to go further. He went away quite recharged."

Other projects? Robert Favreau is scripting a project on institutional education; Hélène Girard completed a film on female adolescence, Tamás Vámos is scripting a low-budget film from a French-Canadian novel; Michel Régner is editing a 10-hour series to be shown by CBC on urban problems and their solutions, and also in the offing is a series on health. Other work includes preparing for the 1976 Olympics (the NFB is the official filmmaker) and short fiction films for a second-language learning program for adults, adolescents and children, *Tout le Monde Parle Français*, while the anima-

tion unit, autonomous for about five years, now produces five to six films per year. (See *Film Reviews* in this issue for a review of *Rien Qu'un Petit Chanson D'Amour*.)

All, of course, is not peaches and cream. As French Programming has found out in the recent past there are definite limits to its scope of operation. The government film commissioner Sydney Newman has personally stopped at least one film during production (*Vingt-quatre Heures ou Plus*) and likewise two completed films. Denys Arcand's (*On Est au Coton*) and Jacques Leduc's (*Cap d'Espoir*) will never see the light of projection bulbs. Forest, however, is uncomfortable with the word censorship.

"Although easy to use, the word censorship is misleading. The administration certainly wouldn't use it. They would say that they applied their prerogative to say a film will or will not be done because it is not in the national interest. They think it is their duty to define the mandate of the Film Board and indeed there is no way that the program committee can be considered a substitute for the Film Commissioner. I see my particular position as one of setting up situations in which maximum consultations can take place. A film may eventually be turned down, but at least everyone involved will have a very precise idea as to why."

When faced with the question of how Québec filmmakers are supposed to be involved in a process of making films "explaining Canada to Canadians," Forest smiles and with a touch of weariness tells how he likes to express the Film Board's mandate as "explaining people to people". His politics are those of social change and he lives in a world of political action rather than political and confrontational rhetoric. "I was quite deeply involved in the Société Nouvelle/Challenge for Change process," continues the quietly passionate Forest, "which I tend to consider a very important process. It has been quite inventive of new modes, not only of filmmaking but new modes of distribution. And out of this developed an attitude of filmmakers as far as the kind of role they could play within the community. I think Société Nouvelle has been one area where it's been possible to renew one form of documentary filmmaking."

Société Nouvelle is a remarkable departure for the NFB. It's run by an interdepartmental committee in Ottawa on which sit members of the Board and various government departments. Its 40 staffers operate separately from the rest of the Film Board but use NFB facilities and equipment. With a \$1.6 million budget they work with different communities, but instead of deciding what to film they let the people of the communities decide what goes in and what doesn't — a process which can help them resolve local problems in the articulation of their ideas. The Société Nouvelle/Challenge for Change mandate runs out next Spring, and indications are that rather than continue the program as separate units, the entire regional production program will function according to Challenge for Change principles.

Québec filmmakers' concerns lie very much with their *nation*, as they call it. This applies not only to the Film Board but to most artistic activity in Québec.

"One must be careful not to think that because you are a filmmaker, then automatically you are a radical. I think, in more cases than not, filmmakers are very much part of the society they think they are contesting. And an important point that must not be overlooked is that French Canada, both historically and geographically, is a much more cohesive society than English Canadians seem to think they are. The result is that French filmmakers have something much more concrete to relate to. Their films cannot help but be a reflection of the ongoing debate in Québec at the moment. I suppose that this is what gives our films a focus and our filmmakers a very special challenge. Their efforts in film production of all kinds — feature and documentary are received by a population which is very responsive. To a very large extent, this is what it all boils down to: there is a demand for our films." ●