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Halifax Co-op

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Peter Elliot paints over his number on the wall of his cell as Lionel Simmons sets up his shot for "Master"

In August 1973, I first heard about the idea of setting up a filmmaker's Co-operative in the Atlantic Provinces. People in this area who came under the broad category of "those interested in film" were asked to write a letter in support of this proposal in order that its originators, Chuck Lapp, Don Duchene and Stefan Wodoslawsky would be able to make a stronger case to the Canada Council.

At the time, I was desperately trying to finish a master's

degree (in film study no less) and I thought the creation of a film Co-op almost impossible. I had just returned to Nova Scotia and I felt that our famous down-east brand of apathy was sufficient to prevent the Co-op's evolution. I didn't write the letter.

One year later, I'm a Co-op member, and Liz and I are doing this interview with Lionel Simmons and John Brett, two members, and Chuck Lapp, the Co-op's co-ordinator.

Lon Dubinsky

Interview with Lionel Simmons and John Brett

How would you characterize the Co-op's atmosphere?

John: There isn't active camaraderie in the social sense. For a while, we all used to drink together but now I talk to whoever happens to be working here when I am. Everyone is busy working on individual projects. We do help each other — we work on each other's crews, we see each other's rushes and we exchange ideas with one another casually.

Is membership restricted?

Lionel: All you have to do is have a member recommend you. It costs \$50 a year — that's to cover costs. There are about 25 members just now, so there's no restriction on numbers. We're still new.

How is it decided who gets the money to make films?

John: We have a script selection committee. If you have a proposal, you submit an outline and a budget.

Lionel: Presentations have ranged from one written line to visual or verbal proposals. The committee doesn't make a "we like it or we don't like it" decision — its most important criterion is probably "will it get done and who can deliver?"

Our main concern at the Co-op this year is to get things done, which can be difficult because we've got to learn and produce at the same time. If we don't produce we'll soon cease to exist.

Should the Co-op be doing more than just making films?

John: Ideally, it would be great to produce, educate, and show films. In the case of this Co-op, it might prove a bad decision practically. Our original credo is to make films. There are enough problems in producing films without diversifying. Perhaps later on, when we are more skilled ourselves, we might think about doing some of these other things.

Are some of these other functions filled by the National Film Board — have they been of assistance to you?

Lionel: Definitely, they're a help. Earlier this year they gave us \$5,000 worth of film stock.

John: The Board has done a lot in terms of screenings. This past summer they had someone traveling around showing films in small, rural communities. The Film Board Office here is new and still rather informal. They've been a lot of help to me personally — they've given me advice, loaned me equipment and employed me for part-time work.

How did you become involved in the Co-op originally?

Lionel: I was auditing a course given by Robert Frank at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design – I was acting here that summer so I went along to the course. Up until then, I had done some work in Super-8 but had no experience in 16mm. Anyway, one day Chuck came into the class with Stefan (Wodoslawsky) and Don (Duchene of the NFB) to try to get people to write letters in support of the establishment of an Atlantic Film Maker's Co-op. And that's how I met them.

John: I wasn't in on things from the beginning – I'd wandered back into Halifax last spring after a year of studying film at Sheridan College in Toronto. I came back to the Maritimes wanting to make a film and I needed the money to make it. I went to the Board and showed them some of my work. Rex Tasker couldn't give me any money but he sent me over to the Co-op. I wrote up a proposal, shot about 500 feet and on the strength of my rushes, they gave me the budget I needed.

What has made you stay?

John: It's rather pragmatic. I do like the Maritimes, but a further incentive to stay here is the current infusion of federal money into the area. The chances of getting a grant here are better as compared to Toronto where there are more filmmakers.

How did you get involved in making your current film, *Voices from the Landscape*?

John: I originally became familiar with the area near Yarmouth four or five years ago when I bought some land and built a cabin there. Then I went away to school and was there only intermittently until this year. I've always been interested in the area and I did some research and discovered that despite the fact that it is one of the wildest, most gaunt and forlorn landscapes imaginable, it was settled as early as 1620 by Latour and the French and has been continuously inhabited since then.

As a place, it is a paradox: people have been living there for several hundred years but they have not conquered the land. Only within the last forty years has life begun to change – up until that point there was a continuity of landscape and lifestyle. For example, there is the old man from whom we bought our property. His children have all the modern amenities but he was a homesteader in the old manner, with oxen, very self-sufficient subsistence farming.

The film uses this old man although it's not about him. There are many objects in the film – trees, old foundations, posts rotting in the marsh, the old man's broken-down house where he used to live, and his face itself. All these things are worn. They change through time. Against these things are juxtaposed photographs of the old people when they were young and of the house when it was a house and not a pile of rubble. Time is a very special consideration in the film. For example, in time the house should be part of a linear progression. Instead it exists in a series of parallel lines. This is because the people in the film speak of the house as it is in the photograph, when, at the same time, it is visibly in ruins.

I want the film to express my feelings about the nature of time, about how people and places change through it, about how people become incorporated into the landscape without being able to mold it.

Do you feel yours is a traditional documentary?

John: Not really, because it doesn't have a traditional continuity. The scenes are not episodic, there's no deliberate organization to produce a "day in the life" effect. There is a basic core to which all the scenes are related. They all take place in the same area and they're all involved in the simultaneous process of life and deterioration. For example, a sequence dealing with the old man's birthday is followed by some shots of the calvary hill at the cemetery.

Is this a specifically regional film?

John: Well it is and it isn't. Given certain elements, one could do it anywhere. It would be a great film to do in Greenland – did you know there was a thriving colony there in the middle ages which died out because it started to get colder? What the film really depends upon is the gaunt dramatic quality of the landscape.

Does the source of grant money make you feel you're under some obligation to deal with regional subjects?

Lionel: It's entirely dependent upon the individual filmmaker's programme. I suppose that to some extent all filmmakers are subject to some influence of place, but that is not to say that any co-op member feels that he or she has to go make a film about, say, Fisherman's Market. Sometimes a particular place is suitable for the film you want to make, like the one John is working on just now. But my film, for example, has no dependency upon locale – it takes place in the future.

Could you talk about how that idea started?

Lionel: Initially I just wanted to write a script because when the Co-op was first formed there seemed to be a lot of people around but there was a definite lack of scripted ideas. So I wrote down every idea that occurred to me and then tried to follow through on one.

Part of *Masterpiece* takes place in the future. To date, I've shot 2,500 feet, mainly dream sequences, spy footage, surveillance footage – which take place not in the past but in parallel time. I wrote an almost-story with an actor friend, Peter Elliot, in mind. He's the main character.

Niki Lipman, Peter Elliot, Lionel Simmons and John Brett shooting "Masterpiece"



Has doing such a complicated feature-style film been good for you and the other co-op members?

Lionel: It's definitely a good film for me to do now, personally. I've got an optical printer and I'm really fascinated by the reworking of images. The scripted film is taking me right through the whole process – shooting, directing, set-building, getting space, etc. And it's good for everybody else, too. I don't think any other film done this year will be using sets, so working on this will be helpful in teaching people some things. *Masterpiece* is bigger than I thought it would be – it has turned into a really collaborative affair.

Are you working within traditional narrative conventions?

Lionel: You might say that there is sort of a story. One reason

I try to avoid strict narrative convention is that I feel that no matter how tightly you shoot, what you shoot is only raw material for the final film. When actually putting the film together, you can change it all completely.

John: I've read the script and as far as I can see, it has no narrative coherence at all. It's just not that sort of thing. Instead it has different images — each with its own meaning. There are certain things you shoot just because you do — and they have a meaning but not one that could be literally translated as part of the film script. There are a variety of ways you could arrange these images, and through an arrangement of these symbolic sequences you create a film which is its own entity. It has its own rules and forms.

Do you work with a sense of audience?

Lionel: Unless you're making *The Great Gatsby* you don't. I



Niki, Peter, Lionel, John, and Fred Allen

have nobody to please but myself. I think it is important not to pander.

John: I'm in two centuries at once on this question, having great *simpatico* for the Baroque and Renaissance approach, as well as the Romantic, which envisions the artist as a semi-deity revealing his wisdom in order to uplift the rest of us. It would be arrogant on my part to assume that I have anything great to say but I do really want people to like my films.

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Interview with Chuck Lapp

Where is the Co-op now: where will it be next year?

Just now, it's an organization of people working on their first major efforts in film. In many cases, these are people who would not have had the opportunity to make films without Co-op funding and equipment. With the experience and credibility which they've been able to achieve, it's possible that some will go out and get grants of their own; this doesn't mean everyone, since I hope the Co-op will maintain its working viability in terms of the Canada Council grant.

It also might happen that a group within the Co-op will form to work on a larger, more ambitious project than has yet been attempted.

Would the Co-op consider feature film making a possibility for the future?

When you mention features, I get the sense that you're talking about some sort of commercial venture. I'd say no if that is what you mean, basically because the Canada Council is not into funding feature films. Their highest budget grant for an individual film project is about \$25,000 — and not too many grants that large are given. Even so, that sort of money

couldn't approach a commercial feature budget. As I said before, some members might do something 'bigger', but not in the commercial sense.

How certain are you of future Council funding?

You have to realize that we are part of an experimental venture in funding film makers which the Council is not necessarily committed to continuing. However, I do think that the decision to fund organizations like the Co-op has been a very positive move, since we will always be working with people who are new to film making, people who would have had difficulty in obtaining an individual grant.

Are there any new areas you might be moving into and how will this affect your forthcoming submission to the Canada Council?

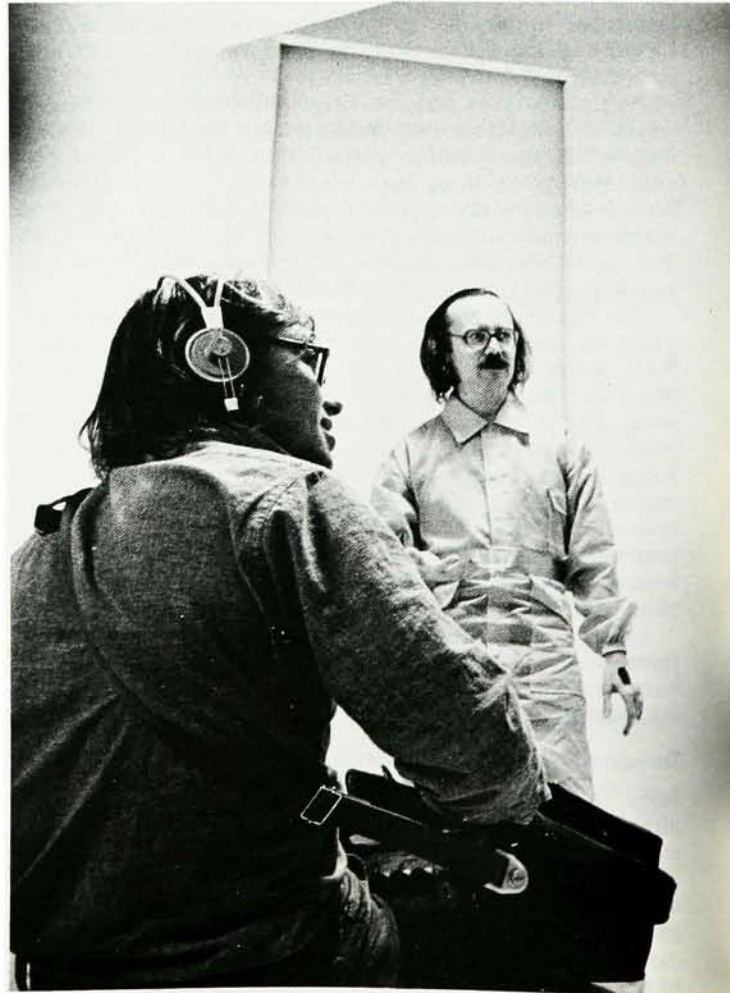
As you know, we're concentrating on production this year, so we haven't been concerned with matters such as screenings and distribution. In the future, we will have our own films to distribute, and we'd like to set up a distribution centre in the Maritimes for our own work, and for independent films from the rest of Canada.

As far as the grant application is concerned; we will be primarily requesting production funding. However, if it becomes apparent that a particular Co-op member is "evolving" towards distribution as a major interest, we would move more rapidly in that direction.

Is there sufficient diversity in the type of films being made in the Co-op?

Definitely, and that's a very good thing. Perhaps I could run through a few of the things people are doing just now. You know about Lionel and John's work. Bill MacGillivray is also

John Brett, Peter Elliot, Art McKay and Lionel Simmons



into documentary. Ramona Macdonald has been doing some very interesting things with improvised drama. Just now, she's editing a film she shot at Portuguese Cove, using the local inhabitants — she discovered some genuine characters.

A Newfoundland filmmaker, Bill Doyle, is doing a documentary in Super-8 about the celebrations of the Province's entry into Confederation. Ken Pittman of Halifax is doing a treatment of the work of a Newfoundland sculptor who takes as his model a sea snake's nest called the devil's purse. It's found washed up on the shore, and there is quite a lot of folklore and superstition about it.

In P.E.I., Niall Burnett is doing some experiments in video-film transfers. Two people in Moncton, Monique Leger and Normand LeBlanc, are making a film in Super-8 about Acadian lifestyles.

How much contact is there with the people outside of Halifax?

We phone; we write letters. And we lend some equipment. The people in New Brunswick have a Super-8 camera, editor and splicer of ours, and they are also receiving technical assistance from the Film Board there. We've sent film stock to Bill Doyle, but the equipment he uses is his own.

Are there any signs that co-ops may be established elsewhere in the Maritimes?

About 3 months ago, the Film Board sponsored a meeting in P.E.I. for all interested in film making, but I'm not sure if that group has developed further. It's very difficult to function unless you have a definite goal in mind and an agency whose support you are aiming for.

Do you have much contact with other co-ops?

Yes, when I lived in Toronto I was a member of the Co-op there, and recently I went back for a visit to try to keep in touch with what is being done. We also have some contact with Vancouver. One of our new members, Jeff Wall, is here finishing a film which he began when he lived in Vancouver.

Do you feel any sort of regional commitment?

Only one, and that is a desire to extend the Co-op beyond the core group in Halifax. Part of our mandate is that we assist people throughout the Atlantic provinces. For example, Bill Doyle applied to the Council for a grant and they directed him to us for assistance. Christine Ritchie, an independent Canada Council recipient, has requested use of our equipment in her work.



Chuck Lapp, co-ordinator

What is your personal feeling about what's happening here?

It's exciting to see the fulfillment of something that some of us have been thinking about for a long time. More things have happened to film here in the past year than I had ever expected. And a very genuine feeling of community has evolved here. When Lionel was doing his film, most of us were up at Dalhousie at 4 a.m. working on his sets — including one guy who had only joined that week. And when John Brett needed someone to go down to Yarmouth for a day's shooting, Ashley Lohmes and Art McKay were prepared to go — just like that. Film making is a communal art; even the most solitary film maker needs the assistance of others. And what is happening here is a very positive experience in co-operation. I'm very happy with it all.

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Talking with Chuck, Lionel, and John has not only focused on the present state of film activity in the Atlantic Provinces and what the future might hold; it also says something about the filmic sensibility, at least in this neck of the woods. A filmmaker must develop his/her own style and point of view as well as an eye that is critical and always changing when it comes to evaluating his work and that of others. However, there is a sense of collective experience that is equally penetrating. New and young filmmakers need to share ideas, frustrations, even their eccentricities sometimes. Here in the Atlantic Provinces the film Co-operative is no longer a concept, it is a working entity. □

Lon Dubinsky teaches film and education at Dalhousie University and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax.

Liz Mullan studied English and Film at Queens University, Kingston and has recently settled in Halifax.

