Highlights of the 12th Montreal International Festival of New Cinema

Vicarious desperation

by David Clarke

Watching anti-nuke videos was my introduction to the 12th Montreal International Festival of New Cinema. Later. A-Bombs were much on my mind as I wandered among the mushrooming crowds of curiously coiffed, attitudinally dysfunctional New Wavers who were there to see what was new in the world of cheap films this year.

The two documentaries about the March for Disarmament of June 12, 1982 – In Our Hands by Robert Richter and The March for Disarmament by Tope Carey – were effective agit-prop. In Our Hands editor Stan Warnow shaped the footage to produce an uplifting film, if one that was a trifle too slick. The approach taken by Tope Carey and the over-200 independent video-makers involved in the project was presumably dictated by the logistics of such a large co-operative effort, but the video’s rough edges make it seem more convincing than In Our Hands.

Neither had much lasting impact, however. It was a documentary entitled Atomic Artist, by Glen Silber and Claudia Vianello, that was startling and thought-provoking.

This is a film – presented in video format at the Festival – about a sculptor named Tony Price, who fishes for material at a junkyard near the Los Alamos nuclear laboratory and uses what he finds in his work. His sculptures have considerable impact in themselves, with the knowledge of what they are made of making them even more effective.

The radiation he is absorbing by using these materials is a major danger to his life, and that makes Price an heir to the Romantic poets whose swoonings and consumption were such an integral part of their work. The gesture of exposing himself to mortal danger for his art also puts him at the forefront of performance art, and at the centre of the dilemma about nuclear war as subject for artistic investigation.

The vast horror of nuclear warfare might well be a subject that only silence can do justice to. As George Steiner suggested in the 50s was the case with the Holocaust. What human can presume to take on the Bomb?

On the other hand, what price silence? So along comes Price, and he puts his life on the line. Someone else comes along and records this act.

We are invited to share vicariously in his desperation.

It produces a large anxiety in us, and a nagging feeling afterwards that we have seen something important – but what exactly is hard to say.

Like an Evel Knievel of nuclear war, Price leaves us feeling cheated, with the demoralizing feeling that nukes eat artistic visions and human sensibilities for breakfast. If Atomic Artist is anti-nuke agit-prop, then it has produced the wrong effect.

As for Tony Price, he is a madman and a visionary and very possibly a genius.

David Clarke is a Montreal-based communications consultant.

Quebec new waves

Quebec film and video participation in this year’s Festival of New Cinema, while by no means extensive, was generally superb.

In video, the series Images d’ici offered a retrospective of Quebec video-making of the 60s to the 80s. Frank Vilade’s Hitch Hiking offered a nostalgic look at by-gone days of 60s transience in a video-verite evocation of trans-Canada hitch-hiking. Linda Craig and Jean-Pierre Saint-Louis’ Fait divers : elle remplace son mari par la TV was a little soap opera about a woman who watches so many soaps she becomes one of the characters, watching a screen of a woman watching a screen of a woman being video-taped. Pierre Rovere’s video premiere of Time Zone completed the transition into the telefuture where technology has completely assimilated nature.

In film, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre’s Au rythme de mon coeur was a lovingly intimate view of family, friends, country and finally the images themselves, soaring free to new dimensions of perpetual rediscovery.

Gilles Groulx’s musical fantasy Au pays de Zom, a portrait of the perfect Philistine, was an absolutely brilliant idea for a satire that doesn’t quite make it. Dominated by Jacques Hétu’s music and Joseph Bureau’s voice, the images, except for the closing scene, never get off the ground.

Finally, Jacqueline Levitin’s Pas fou comme on le pense was a marvellously convincing film about madness. During a four-day get-together 10 psychiatric patients discuss with true insight and honesty how they themselves experience their madness and how they feel others perceive it. As they re-enact their experiences, somewhere between the fiction and the underlying anguish they describe, there lies a true poignancy which Levitin captures with delicacy and sobriety. Her film showed that images do talk when they have something to say. Levitin’s film got a tremendous round of applause, fully deserved.

The two Quebec features, both anti-nuclear, were also successful. In Saint-Louis’ Le maitre de Zer, a portrait of the perfect Philistine, was an absolutely brilliant idea for a satire that doesn’t quite make it. Dominated by Jacques Hétu’s music and Joseph Bureau’s voice, the images, except for the closing scene, never get off the ground.

Finally, Jacqueline Levitin’s Pas fou comme on le pense was a marvellously convincing film about madness. During a four-day get-together 10 psychiatric patients discuss with true insight and honesty how they themselves experience their madness and how they feel others perceive it. As they re-enact their experiences, somewhere between the fiction and the underlying anguish they describe, there lies a true poignancy which Levitin captures with delicacy and sobriety. Her film showed that images do talk when they have something to say. Levitin’s film got a tremendous round of applause, fully deserved.

The march for disarmament of June 12, 1982 – In Our Hands by Robert Richter and The March for Disarmament by Tope Carey – were effective agit-prop. In Our Hands editor Stan Warnow shaped the footage to produce an uplifting film, if one that was a trifle too slick. The approach taken by Tope Carey and the over-200 independent video-makers involved in the project was presumably dictated by the logistics of such a large co-operative effort, but the video’s rough edges make it seem more convincing than In Our Hands.

Many of the other, non-nuke oriented, videos that were screened on the cute little plaster columns provided for the occasion were of a wretched ineptness that only a grant-giving bureaucrat could
Festivals

Searching for the noble savage in Tropiatic

Aibiti-Témiscamingue

The little fest that's growing

When the plane dropped us off in Rouyn on Oct. 22, the captain was the first to wish the passengers a good film festival. They don't mince words in Rouyn and they see things on the grand scale.

Film is endemic to this distant mining area whose land the Quebec government had cleared not even 50 years ago while Father Proulx's camera filmed the entire, bizarre saga of the colonization of Aibiti. The people here are driven by a violent desire to create. Not to imitate others, but to satisfy a local population's great hunger for culture. And that's one reason why the Aibiti-Témiscamingue Film Festival is such an enormous popular success.

Perhaps one has to get off the beaten paths of culture to truly appreciate the importance a film festival can command. And at Rouyn, for the second year running, the festival was a genuine cinematic feast, with both simplicity and fervor. There were many films: endless talk of films; and a damned good time was had by all.

All that thanks to a small group of organizers (Jacques Matte of course, but also Suzanne Bourassa, Louis Dallaire, Suzanne Menard, Guy Parent, Danielle Tessier). And a great swarm of spectators, a-feeding, a-brunching, and a-drinking till the wee hours every night at the Théâtre du Cuivre. And seeing films, be sure.

From Oct. 22-27, the theatre was packed: 15 features and 24 shorts from 10 countries. The organizers managed to lure the big critical guns in from Montreal as well as all the regional press. There were even a few ministers of the Crown, including Communications minister Francis Fox, who noted that the Aibiti Fest was the only new film festival in the last two years to have merited support from the federal Festivals Bureau.

And of course there were the V.I.P.s, the very important guests. Margot Kidder was there to present the French version of Don Shub's Heartbeats, starring herself. To Kidder's great surprise, the Aibiti public seemed to love the film. Husband Philippe d'Broca was there to present his feature L'Africain which opened the festival. French filmmaker Gabriel Auer brought his Les yeux des aieux, a film about Uruguan political prisoners and the international Red Ross. Orlov Senke, the Dutch filmmaker, brought his Le goître de la mouche which ran off with the Festival's Grand Prize.

Noteworthy Quebec filmmakers presented at the festival included: regional filmmakers Robert Cornelier (Le futur) and Madeleine St-Marie (Dompêtes de moutons), actor Jean-Louis Millette (Pourquoi l'Étrange M. Zolock s'intéressait-il tant à la bande dessinée?), director Archer Lamothe (Mémoire bâtarde), director Iolande Rossignol (Laure Gaudreault), actress Louise Dusault (Étusbau), Laure Gaudreault, director Alain Chartrand (L'étusbau), director Hubert-Yves Rose (Voyageur), directors Julien Poulin and Pierre Falardeau (Les vacances d'Elvis Gratton), director Jacques Augustin (Habitant glorieux), filmmaker Daniel Rancourt (L'acteur, la voix d'homme), actress Mireille Deyglun (Bonneur d’occasion) and director Claude Fournier (Bonneur d’occasion).

Jacques Matte and his organizers are already hard at work preparing the third Festival for Nov. 17-18, 1984 again at the 569-seat Théâtre du Cuivre. With over 4000 spectators last year, 3000 in '82, organizers are confidently predicting 5000 for this year. In Aibiti-Témiscamingue, the future looks good for quality cinema.

Jean-Pierre Tadros

January 1984 - Cinema Canada/21

love. Video-makers like the director of Time in Rectangle, Norio Imai, seem determined to recreate every error, chase up every blind alley, and waste much time as generations of their independent film counterparts have done. Watching Imai unravel videotape to classical music was a most unfruitful experience.

With ne plus ultra quality video tech­nique on display in an abundance of rock videos, Tape Affair by Massintto Mazzanti was the only video I saw that measured up. It is the story of a video director and a fashion model who as a last resort use a home video recorder to tape messages of love to each other. Their schedules have made them a Romeo and a Juliet struggling to find each other, and it is a cleverly done work that should win the director a gig with Duran Duran.

The Only Difference Between Men and Boys is the Price of Their Toys is a docudrama by Dutch director Steven de Winter that investigates the international arms industry about as well as the C.B.C.'s Fifth Estate would on an off day.

Tube Style, Amos Poe Interview and '50s Dreamer are videos by the Italian video house Cashbah Productions. They shouldn't win Cashbah any gigs except maybe with Zeller's fashion department.

Turning to film, Variety by New York director Bette Gordon was by far the best I saw at the Festival. There is a distinctive Bette Gordon visual style, first witnessed in a short film called Empty Suitcases at the Festival a couple years ago. While not sentimental, it is a moving story set in Paris on the part of a mysterious stranger. The Hitchcockian intrigue that ensues is a little short on logic, but marvelous in its evocation of atmosphere. The film works.

Another major film was Ghost Dance, by English director Ken McMullen. It was somewhat grandiose, in fact—a sprawling look at all the ramifications of the Alamo, the military filmmaking. on the part of the Festival staff, who continue to be the most sprightly and innovative independent film entrepre­neurs.

So here's hoping that next year's Silence-on-Film War will ease up a little, and the world's alternative filmmakers will be feeling a little perkier. For, God knows, some of the videos at the Festival—the ones not worth mentioning—were among the dreariest, most claus­trophobic and misconceived efforts this critic has ever walked out on.
New cinema faces:

Films are only part of a film festival, and the 12th International Festival of New Cinema was no exception to this rule. The fest also offered press conferences, a cabaret, a seminar with noted French cameraman Henri Alekan and West Germany's Thomas Mauch, a retrospective of the works of British animator Len Lye, as well as a recent selection of contemporary Greek cinema. Photographer Linda Hammond captured some of the directors and actors who accompanied their films to Montreal.

Photographs by Linda Hammond

Linda Hammond is a Montreal freelance photographer.