The creation myth:
Jacques Bobet & the birth of a national cinema

by Michael Dorland

The National Film Board as we know it is about to disappear. Within a month, the federal Film Policy is expected to implement recommendation 64 of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee (Applebaum-Hebert) that "the National Film Board should be transformed into a center for advanced research and training in the art and science of film and video production."

Eighteen years ago, in an "Open Letter to the Government Film Commissioner," (Liberte, no. 44-45, May-June 1966), NFB producer Jacques Bobet had anticipated the Board's fate in these words: "If the NFB does not take part with force and continuity in the growth of a great Canadian cinema, it will lose everything, including its 'traditional (documentary) mission.' All that will remain will be a half-empty warehouse which filmmakers will look upon with contempt as a place where (less talented) youngsters can get training at government expense. And that training itself will be what France's IDHEC (Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques) has become: formalistic, old before its time and sterile. Under these conditions, one might still attempt to convert the Board into a school, or an international film centre for under-developed countries, or even a National Centre for Didactic Film, but there is little likelihood that anything worthwhile will come of it."

Sadly, Bobet has seen his prediction come all too true. Today, at the end of a 37-year career at the Board, the father of the Québécois feature film has become, as he puts it, "a pariah."

Jacques Bobet joined the NFB, then in Ottawa, in 1947 at the age of 28. A former teacher of literature and philosophy in France, Bobet was, until 1956 when he became a producer, in charge of French versioning of over 500 NFB films, directing some as well.

As producer, Bobet was the man behind such Quebec cinema classics as Pierre Perrault's Pour la suite du monde (1964), Le regne du jour (1966) and Les voitures d'eau (1968), Gilles Groulx's Le chat dans le sac (1964) and Gilles Carle's La vie heureuse de Leopold Z (1965). From 1968-70, Bobet headed French production's programming committee, subsequently returning to producing. Over 40 more films resulted, notably Jeux de la XXIe Olympiade (1977), Deux épisodes dans la vie d'Hubert Aquin (1979), and more recently Comme en Californie (1983).

Since 1982, Bobet has been involved with coproductions between the Board and the private sector, beginning with the Cousteau Foundation/NFB production, Les pieges de la mer. As of April 1983, Bobet became executive producer of Studio C (French feature-film production) which collaborated with Radio-Canada and International Cinema Corporation in the recent making of Le crime d'Ovide Plouffe.

Bobet leaves the Board to return to his first career: teaching -- not literature, philosophy or cinema -- but, instead, a subject which has been a life-long passion, namely music. As he said before the following interview began: "What does any of this mean compared to one note of Mozart?"
Jacques Boubet: Happenstance. I was called Jacques Boubet. I think they had a young group who wanted to teach English films - it was a good school. But as soon as the war ended they dropped everything. An intern commissioner served for six months and then he read in a newspaper in France that there was an old film school that was being replaced by Mr. Arthur Irwin. In other words, the postwar card got off to a very, very wobbly start.

And I said, at that point, the Board could easily have disappeared at that point. Someone once jokingly said that the only reason it continued was that nobody had the money to suppress the Board. And he added that the reason for it to disappear. The same gag reappeared when they moved us to Montreal in 1956! - because no one had the money to suppress the Board. Today, it's the Board's much smaller than Canadian cinema, but then we were able to do a lot of good. Yet even then there were a few people who thought that there was a certain independence from politics, and a mandate that was also cultural, namely that we do our work in Canada. For a long time we'd been doing a lot of things that involved vital Canadian interests. That's why one of the first films we did abroad was done during the (1956) Suez Crisis because it was a matter of one of the few Canadians in the UN peace-keeping force sent over for the cease-fire. There was another thing, and that became very dangerous later, but then it was just about urgency. Under Grierson's influence and that of the first NFB filmmakers, there was a spirit in the place that meant that.
costi maybe? Or she’d say, bush pilots is a wonderful idea for a film the could... do we do in Alberta instead of northern Ontario? In other words, there was a complex interaction between the geography, the topics, the available filmmakers, and distribution. We really tried to satisfy everybody. As soon as the meetings were over, the filmmakers would go back to the films they wanted to do, and so we’d meet again one year later: Ah, yes, bush pilots, an excellent idea but we should really try to go to Manitoab this year... And so it happened that in the NFB’s principles there really was the expectation that each filmmaker would make creative work, cultural work, and so that kind of principle came to dominate and the Board became a cultural outfit much more than an information outfit.

**Cinema Canada:** What was this by design or by accident?  
**Jacques Bobet:** I think it was in the nature of the place itself – because you had all these people under one roof, because they interacted with one another, because they didn’t have to worry about money or political interference. It was really only the politicians in Ottawa who seriously believed in the idea of information from sea to sea. To us it was obvious that we were creating cultural, quality works. And slowly that idea imposed itself. There were other reasons too, that would be too long to explain. In a sense in those years we had to take advantage of the filmmakers, a kind of abuse of confidence that unhappily went too far. But there were so few filmmakers then! There was no film school, no special training, all we could say was: There were no rules in the water and swim. A film would be made, we’d look at it and say: Well, it’s very hard to judge on the basis of a first film, a guy may have had leave, it didn’t suit him. There was a tremendous interaction between crews and newcomers, a strong human response. A guy would suddenly say, well he was a part of it or not. It was an action experience directly on the terrain – as soon as a newcomer came back from a shoot we would tell right away if he was integrated with the group or not, if he was now part of the “cinema gang.” It may sound silly but it was tremendously human and efficacious – at least until everything got too big and too complicated. It was easy to say to a director: Okay, do it and we’ll see afterwards. And you could do that because filmmaking wasn’t expensive then. It allowed us for years to practice a recovery of cinematographic methods – remember there was no school; this was the only way, admittedly, financially, it wasn’t very brilliant, because the kinds of films that came out of this were not terribly utilitarian. They could have been and they could have been good, but the fact is that, overall, it was a kind of cinema that disappeared very rapidly, that had no staying power. Especially that, despite the war years, there had been during the war-years.

**Cinema Canada:** What made this kind of filmmaking disappear? A lack of distribution?  
**Jacques Bobet:** No, lack of quality. The films were distributed just about everywhere, but the films themselves didn’t really capture the era. Yet they permitted a rebirth of cinematographic methods and slowly the filmmakers acquired their craft and began to feel out the rudiments of their own personalities. Then they were able to quickly make the transition to more personalized works. It allowed the beginnings – indeed, it was the beginning – of a Canadian cinema. Let there be no doubt: we gave those people, all year long and year after year, the possibility of becoming cinematographic auteurs. We didn’t call it that then, the word didn’t exist, but it was that that was preparing itself. It was true of Michel Brauault on the French side as it was for all the young people who began a little later in the same spirit.

**Cinema Canada:** In other words, the beginning of feature filmmaking was this feeling that, okay, this is what we’re doing, or was it a progression, as you were saying, of cultural creation coming from an internal dynamic?

**Cinema Canada:** What was the reaction to television? Was it conscious to the degree of saying now we have to do something different? How did you experience this technological rupture?  
**Jacques Bobet:** For several months, there was a very rough battle at the Board. Very, very rough. There was a tremendous debate among the unit heads, the filmmakers, everyone. We’re talking now about the very beginnings of television. Nobody knew what it would be. We’re not talking about the creation of CBC TV. The issue was what group was going to have rights over television? Now CBC radio already did the sound from coast-to-coast, and we did the image. Yet there was this moment’s hesitation at the Board, just at that moment when it could have said: Television, that’s us. That would have changed everything. Or it would have changed nothing; it would perhaps have simply reversed the names. But it was now, for the first time, that the Board’s lack of ambition revealed itself, and would be repeated over the years three or four times. We backed off: “No, no, we’ll contribute to television, but in our personal manner.”

**Cinema Canada:** Was this a left-over from the Grierson tradition?  
**Jacques Bobet:** Yes, there was this emphasis on quality, there was an auteur mentality as opposed to the vulgarities of television, so it wouldn’t have had the freedom it called that then. And at the same time came the arrival of the hand-held camera. So the move to Montreal on the one hand and the hand-held camera on the other would be the two determining elements in the development of a Canadian cinema, especially on the French side.

When I arrived at the Board in ’47 there was a so-called French unit, called “the French unit” in English, and it was falling apart, month by month; they’d hire young people who were unhappy in Ottawa, who felt they didn’t belong, that the pace was too fast in English, or at any rate run by English Canadians to whom they were the underlings. The French unit head was an Englishman and the unit was falling apart.

**Cinema Canada:** Was that something you felt also?  
**Jacques Bobet:** Of course, though they felt it much more than I did as I had all the creative influence and I just arrived, who rolled up his sleeves and said, Well, what do we do now? You see, I arrived as a representative of French Canada. The English were more polite towards me; they were a little more respectful because I represented a branch of the great tree of French culture, all the proper education and I could write fast. So I had a certain respect. But the French-Canadians, the Québécois, they didn’t feel it so much. The Québécois then, felt much more strongly than I – for generations they felt frustrated by the English who always ran the show. — It happened that the French-English was as a trial run just when I arrived. But that only lasted about a month because Brunet then left for Europe, and so they put me in charge of the whole unit and he did practically nothing at all. It was absurd. There was Roger Blais; there were some Québécois who did – Vicenç Johin, and Bernard Devlin who worked like a horse. Roger Blais would produce at least a film a month, possibly two. ‘He’d take off – a simple: long shot, close-up and that was all there was to it. They worked on the English side and they worked well; they spent most of their most creative years working with English crews.

With the second generation, the same thing happened: large crews where the talent was first made, as a mark before being able to free themselves: Michel Brauault, for example emerged from Tom Daly’s unit. And others worked on films by Georges Dufaux. But they all started out working for English production and, meanwhile, in my corner I was redoing everything in French since I was there to bilingualize the Board. There was only one thing I could do and that was set up...
some kind of continuity: it was our only hope. Because otherwise to start and stop every year, to change crews, to question everything—we'd never have made it. So I got a secretary, then a budget, then some assistants, and gradually, gradually, it happened.

Now nobody disputed the fact that we should be film production in French. But nobody took charge and from year to year to month to month—the situation got worse. Petel was able, if I remember, to shoot two films in Parc Lafontaine and La terre de Caen which wasn't bad. Roger Blais worked in English for the most part; Bernard Devlin worked mainly in English, and then there was me.

It was ironic because this was the time of our first cultural review commission, the one headed by Vincent Massey with Father Levesque who represented the French element. And one day I was in the cafeteria at the Château Laurier and someone came up and tapped me on the shoulder and said, Let's go, I'm taking you upstairs. This guy was the secretary of the commission and he said, Hurry up because Father Levesque is waiting to see you. And Father Levesque, after questioning me for two hours, admirably summed up the situation: "At this moment at the Film Board, bilingualism consists of you and a secretary." And that's what it was.

After we moved to Montreal, I had a slightly larger group so that we could produce better scripts and even do a little research. I had some talented guys: Jacques Godbout, Marcel Martin, Gilbert Choquette. I had one or two editors, including Werner Nold and later Yves Leduc; I'd even gotten a secretary. And that meant a portable camera arrived and that was a shattering change for Canada. To be sure it meant changes everywhere but for Canada it was something special that I'll try to analyze. I can't guarantee the truth of what I'm saying, only the myth. And I can't guarantee what remains with me because I've loathed writing and most of us have never been oriented towards the past.

At that moment the portable camera arrived in many countries at once, starting before we took our first look at a script in English, and in New York, and in France with Jean Rouche—Michel Braut was involved with that. So here and in other countries, that camera arrived as if it had mobility. But it was only in Canada that a style of national cinema resulted...

**INTERVIEW**

**Executive producer Bobet and NFB film editor-in-chief Werner Nold during the planning of Jeux de la XXIe Olympiade (1976)**

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**Cinema Canada:... from the combina- tion of the Board plus the hand-held camera**

*Jacques Bobet:* There was the group, but there was something else that was fundamental. Many of the filmmakers then—and I've got to say it in quotes because they used to tell me that in English, it was usually "illiterate." If there was one thing they had in common, except for people like Jacques Godbout, it was that they hadn't written. They hadn't written and most of them couldn't write. A guy like Gilles Carle always had a good pen, Claude Fournier too, Godbout certainly because he had a very special kind of writing. They didn't have a script. But if you take a pen and write half-a-page, they'd first get down on their knees: "Listen, you write it, I'll sign it." They hated the idea.

**Cinema Canada: And of course that determined the whole approach to filmmaking: go shoot the film and do the scene in afterward?**

*Jacques Bobet:* Of course. We'd say: You don't have a script—can't you see that they write scripts in other countries? So we'd try and write scripts for films about bush pilots or other diseases—imagine doing that with a bunch of people utterly rebellious at the idea! Having done that, having done our scripts along traditional documentary lines or some vague recycling of Hollywood cinema as we were also using actors, off we'd go to try to shoot what we'd written. Well, there wasn't much reason to write scripts finally because it was abominable. Because of preconceived ideas in a domain that called for the greatest spontaneity in documentary, we made some very bad films, very bad. We'd say: If you don't write it out first we won't approve your budget and you won't be able to shoot. When that portable camera arrived, it was a marvelous liberation. Even then the administration was still saying: We'll print up the script of Les enfants du paradis and you're going to study it to see how it's done. They asked people like Labrecque, Gilles Gravel, who'd already written a script for a film who didn't want to read, who didn't enjoy reading and, even more, did not want to "analyze" films, for whom that was something done by European intellectuals. If analysis of scripts was required, fine, but not here. And that was marvelous.

We had enough money to make films and to keep on shooting. A lot of footage was shot, and with very little attempt at scripting, the absolute minimum scribbled on a desk corner, just enough to get the approval of an English production head who himself couldn't read French. So it really wasn't as stupid as it may seem. There was a kind of delegation of power that was making itself felt. The fact remains that the first two feature films we made in French, Gilles Gravel's Le chat dans le sac and Gilles Carle's Léopold Z were decided upon on the basis of a page-and-a-half synopsis.

And this was the birth of French production. I'm speaking of the years '55-'56, '58-'59. Once in Montreal, the guys no longer felt in exile as they had felt in Ottawa. They were home and suddenly recruiting people was no longer such a problem. There were people who already had a certain artistic quality, who had done this or that. Gilles Carle had just graduated from Beaux-Arts; Godbout came from teaching. Staffing was easier, people stayed and a group took shape. Not just directors but the camera-men who had worked so long with English crews began to reconvert to the French side because now there was work in French; editors began to specialize on the French side also. So that when Pierre Jueane arrived in 1963 (as director of French production) all he had to do was codify a change that had already taken place, an osmosis that redirected the Quebecois to the French side.

Now the hand-held camera in a very short time would alienate us completely from both the administration and the Board's technical services. The technical services, ever since Grierson, (Stuart) Legg and Spottiswoode, were renewed from England and that had continued. Those were people there who'd been formed in a hard school: a shot was done this way and no other, you didn't point a camera into a light, you didn't shoot against the sun, your camera angle was like this—all good principles even for the documentaries of another era, to which one could come back to one day but after we'd first assimilated other things. So all the technical services said it was just awful, especially what was being done in French production. And the film editors! Whenever a new editor was needed in the place, hop! the phone call or telegram went out to England and three days later a young editor fresh out of Pinewood would arrive and say, No, no, this is how you make your sound-track: if you show a passing truck you have to hear the truck, if you show a tractor, you have to hear the tractor...

Meanwhile we were out shooting and there were still some pretty bad films, but all of a sudden, you began to see in the films, for the first time, how people really walked, how they moved, how they really sat, how they ate, how they dressed, how they talked to one another. At that moment, we became witnesses, terribly candid witnesses, not only technically because it was all happening at once, but at the same time, we were witnessing the appearance of Quebec. And I speak of Quebec because a group had crystallized that could say: Ah, that's us, that's our province.

Let me tell you a little story, the story of Labrecque's first film on the French side—60 Cycles. That little film was known as the “terror of Film Festivals” because it won I don't know how many prizes. It's a savage little film, wildly orchestrated, cut with a sickle and with an incredible vitality. And what struck me while we were making that film—Gosselin, Jacques Leduc was camera-man and I was with them on location—and they'd say: We can't take out that shot, that's the Ile d'Orleans, everybody has to see the Ile d'Orleans, it's ours. And it was like that for all of Quebec: Ah, the Ile aux grues, we have to have the Ile aux grues in the film. From the time that the English had held us: films about Quebec, go ahead, make them, it's up to you, why should we have to make them for you? Now, all of a sudden, they were doing it, and they were doing it with a feeling of human possession, with poetic possession. Their Quebec: they were showing it, they were putting it on the screen. And you see that in 60 Cycles, which is really a rather brutal little film the way it was made but with a marvelous vitality, and though you don't imagine it now, that was already a representation of the taking hold of the Quebecois landscape. For the first time, French Canadians were taking possession of their province and putting it on the screen. It's curious—and it was a marvelous period. We had seen all a lot of films and when you've seen a lot of cinema, your head is stuffed with cliches about how people should move, how they should go in or out of a room—you're used to a classical montage. And in the first three minutes of a film you've established that classical montage...
climate, you can't get out of it. You have to keep it. But if you don't introduce it - and that's what we discovered - if in the first three minutes you break that rou-
tini, it's the first thing in the spectator's mind. A little while after, people don't think about it any longer. From the word go they accept the story as it is. For which reason the truth was a very important factor, and they are obliged at that moment to redirect their attention to the film's emotions, to something finally more important than a simple take/verse angle.

Cinema Canada: And it was this you started - the feature film? What was the relationship?
Jacques Bobet: Yes. Of course. What happened was that the very vague pretext of "information" and they weren't even then that the research was never enough, not for a good information film. We never did very good research. We didn't have the internal background that would let a guy do proper, literate, university-level re-
search was never enough, not for a good feature film. We just had this clear feeling that there's one word that can create the basis of what would become the CFDC. For him, now was the time because if we were going to do features, the Board would find itself supporting people who would be a track for the young people who wanted to make features. But I didn't agree with the way he went about it.

Cinema Canada: You mean the idea of international coproductions?
Jacques Bobet: Well, Pierre Juneau was quite enthusiastic about that. Of course, his ideas, he thought about that a lot. He spoke about it a lot; he organized them: It was all very intelligent. Everything that can be done, that's very intelligent. But it was too soon for us, from the point of view of the spirit of the place. At the very moment when we were all agog when Trudeau was showing us, there he was saying, "Let's do a coproduction; we'll bring in scriptwriters and you'll see how it's done." But the filmmakers said: We don't want those others.

We weren't there yet. Things like that didn't interest us. And so we come to another point, and that was the films that were badly taken. We had succeeded in stretching the documentary to include fiction, we had produced a few films with a character that were performed by people who were familiar with that omnipresent camera there - what I mean is that Trudeau's arrival didn't vanish, they're still there - but it was the same, we had begun with, I think, four films about women. We had to have some common theme.

Cinema Canada: It was as easy as that - sure, why not?
Jacques Bobet: More or less. We said: Let's give it a try. At that time things were easier. We decided to try, to make four experimental films about women. And we looked at what the very latest was, a film on Pauline Julien. Pierre Patry did one; Dufaux, Clement Proulx, Gilles Carle. And the year after we said: Let's do another series. Now the Board was beginning to ask questions: What exactly are you going to do? A super-subject, Very Canadian, films about women. We did come back to the idea of a series of four or five films about winter and among those films, on a page-and-a-half synopsis, it's la chat dans le sac and Le vie heureuse de Léopold Z. But it wasn't as if this happened without any one knowing about it. It would be easy to say, ho, ho, we really got them, they didn't know what was going on. (Film commissioner Guy) Robeige knew perfectly well, you know: We have foreign offices but above all, it's important, we have to create the basis of what would be come the framework for the young people who wanted to make films. But we didn't have very rapidly ended up with a far, far more original style of dramatization than what we came back to from coproduction. This is why we've done Le chat and two other films that have since disappeared that are extrem-
ely revealing of the whole climate. Ou etes-vous done? And Entre to be sure, at first they seemed a little bizarre because they were a mixture of documentary and fiction that didn't win us many friends. But the most important thing is that we didn't do these things.

We still do even though it's one of those questions that you can never answer because history doesn't repeat itself - I've tried to explain. We were engaged and we didn't, we wouldn't have very rapidly ended up with a far, far more original style of dramatization than what we came back to from coproduction. This is why we've done Le chat and two other films that have since disappeared that are extrem-
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On the one hand, a certain number of good directors whom I can count on the fingers of one hand, who did manage to develop more and more of their own personalities and make films true to themselves. La bête lumineuse is Pierre Perrault ground up in a coffee-grinder and splattered onto a screen. It's pure. These people are now mature and on the verge of the great works of their lives. And on the other hand, both in production and distribution, things dragged along. We don't even have the pretense anymore of having once been a great filmmaking school, a major filmmaking center that put Canada on the map. And now what? We can go on: if we don't have the vision to renew ourselves, if we don't have the ability to come up with something different, we find ourselves under Applebaum-Hebert's guillotine. And this is exactly what I wrote Mr. Robere in 67, that we would end up being demoted to a training school, a waystation for pilgrims. Fifteen years ago, I described to him in black and white exactly the sort of thing that would come out of Applebaum-Hebert. I said that what we would have got a place that has four good films a year and 14 mediocrities. That's very costly, that's a hair-raising waste of money. If on 14 films you can't produce 10 that are good, then don't do it. And I'm not even sure that's been done. For years now we haven't managed to do an honorable percentage of decent films. I can't run out in the halls shouting: "Look, it stinks what you're doing," but for me and I've always viewed this place as a laboratory experience - we're sterile. For years now you've had a number of directors who've been able to develop personally but at the detriment, if you want to look at it that way, of the corporate image. That's why I couldn't say anything about the corporate image because I know that when you try to improve that image deliberately, it fails. Inevitably.

**Cinema Canada: How do you explain that sterility?**

**Jacques Bobet:** Too much security. I come from a tradition of film, that's probably in part why it's too secure. This country's very much too secure for a number of filmmakers who could do much better if they were provoked. Not enough contact with the outside. A place that's always closed like a fortress under siege is deplorable. I spent the entire summer on a production with 80 technicians. A controversial affair: Les Plouffe II. I don't want to get into the cultural worth of Les Plouffe, that's not my responsibility - it's the industry's responsibility in its totality. It's written by a Canadian, the producer is Canadian, and the two directors both came out of the Board. So I could do my share honestly. The attitude and the filmmaker has to carry that coin is that I want to complete Jean Beaudin's film (Mário x'en va-t'en guerre), and I want to do the Mankiewicz (Les fous de Bassam). So these were two very controversial productions - and not a single filmmaker from here was bothered to go down there to say hello. So financial problems - age - and the CFDC can flatter itself that its cultural influence, it's not that's what you're there for. These are the worst possible conditions for a film industry to flourish. These are the worst possible conditions for a subsidiary culture and the filmmaker to carry all that around his neck.

And the CFDC can flatter itself that its money has a cultural connotation. But for the producers the CFDC isn’t a quality control commission, or a readers' committee, it's nothing, it's a bank where the producers bank. And the CFDC says, Christ, give me the money because that's what you're there for. If that’s the CFDC’s cultural influence, it's not enough.

But once you get rid of the Board, there won't even be whatever cultural influence is left, and the government will have alienated itself from the dedicated from or separated itself from a cultural tool that never took seriously, what was always assumed was just an information tool. But they ought to know, if you look at the United States, that there's an enormous difference between the culture of America and what we've been. And the Board will find itself in a position where it won't even have a foot in the door any longer. And we have sacrificed whatever capital this place has in terms of talent, years of experience and all that. And if they think that one day they'll be able to reconstitute that, it's an illusion.

A cultural agency is a miracle, it's always a miracle. Even if you put together the most extraordinary conditions - money, movement, freedom from political interference, and the need to promote the country itself - even then there are no guarantees - and two of these conditions can be sacrificed.

It was a miracle that all of a sudden it happened that Canadian cinema began. Cultural miracles are subtle, and every country in the world knows that.