

Montreal's 14th International Festival of New Cinema and Video

The victory of video



by Jan Teag

After what was, from all reports, a disastrous 1984, Montreal's International Festival of New Cinema and Video (Oct. 17-27) landed back on its feet in 1985. And despite many well meant suggestions, after last year's fiasco, that it would do well to align itself with the World Film Festival, this year's indications are that the New Cinema and Video Festival can stand firmly on its own.

With the intent of reorganizing and cutting expenses for 1985, the festival was pared down, offering approximately 50 films and 70 videos, compared to 1984's some 75 films and 170 videos. The three theatres used for screening (cut from six in 1984) were easy to reach by public transit, small in size, and surrounded by bars and cafes in some of Montreal's most sociable areas. The changes were effective, providing for a more leisurely paced event that at times had an atmosphere of intimacy and camaraderie, particularly at the late evening shows.

And it all seems to have worked. According to Claude Chamberlan, Festival co-director and founder, it has never had such a success in its fourteen years. The attendance of approximately 30,000 surpassed all expectations and was enough to cover the deficit from

1984. Several shows sold out prompting the addition of ten supplementary screenings. The work of Québécois artists and better known European filmmakers like Raoul Ruiz and Wim Wenders seemed particularly popular, though the first showing of Wenders' *Docu Drama* saw a theatre nearly full at the beginning but half-empty long before the finish. Comprised of three basic sections (international feature-length films; New Italian Cinema; and video separated into international video and Canadian video), the schedule was an honest representation and melange of northern hemisphere production, though it was noticeable that there were no features presented from English Canada (while there were three from French Canada).

So if, for its 14th edition, a reorganized, smaller-scale Festival seemed to be the successful way to go, what about the films and videos themselves? How did they contribute to the Festival's success? For ultimately, it must be asked, what is a program of new cinema and video meant to be about?

The thrust of the Festival independent productions from around the world, presenting films and videos that normally would not be seen here. With the mandate comes the opportunity of "discovering" new talents or new trends. It is a policy that provides a lot of room for different, experimental, avant-garde productions. But unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case in practice, and that may be the result of several factors.

For one, it could be that the Festival,

in its such for a more accessible and commercially successful program, chose not to include films that would not necessarily appeal to a broad range of viewers. Another reason may be that truly experimental films are just not made anymore, leaving the experimental field to the video artists (which seems the case for this Festival). As Festival programmer Dimitri Eipides says in his program remarks about independent cinema: "This cinema is no longer exotic or rare by any means. Instead it is becoming more and more popular, and enjoys the support of a more advanced and demanding public."

His is a challenging statement, especially for the ardent cinephiles who adamantly affirm that films retain an artistic leadership which video has not yet come remotely close to threatening. But if independent filmmakers are increasingly entering the mainstream, and making films that are more acceptable to the populace (i.e. "popular"), where indeed, one must wonder, will the impetus come from for the "radical renewal" that Eipides also claims as a quality of independent cinema?

Yet if we disregard the Festival's video section for a moment and look strictly at the films, there were not many that represented anything different from the established norms, whether these be *film noir*, documentary, the use of sets, lighting, camera, plot or themes. In fact there was, generally speaking, very little in the exportation/exploitation of the medium itself to suggest progression or rejuvenation of "film as art".

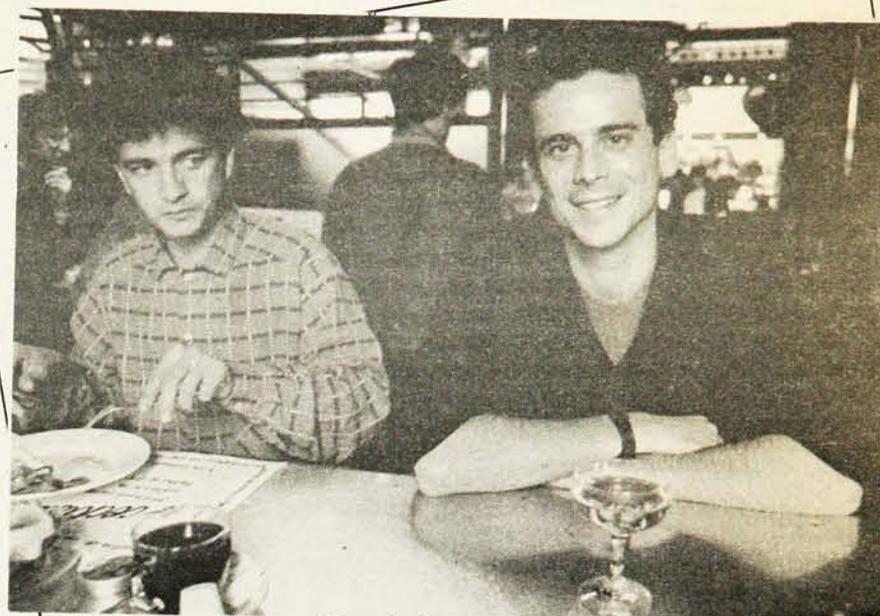
For example, the Festival opener, Leon Ichaso's *Crossover Dreams* (U.S.A.), is a basic "journey of discovery" story. The hero, Rudy Veloz (Ruben Blades) loses his girl, his friends, and himself, on the way to fame and fortune. On his inevitable way back down he regains friends and self, finding himself back where he started (minus the girl), a wiser and better human being. *Crossover Dreams* is enjoyable viewing mostly because of the salsa music that permeates it, but otherwise it is unadventurous and undemanding visually and thematically. It relies upon tried-and-true formulas used in almost every other film that explores human drama set in a large metropolis.

On the other hand, *The Innocent* (U.K.) is a visually compelling film. Rich in texture and tone, its photography of nature rivals the very best work in that genre. Again, it is essentially a traditional film. John Mackenzie has put together a striking and professional piece that is beautifully scripted, acted and shot, but it offers absolutely nothing different from what the mainstream films offer.

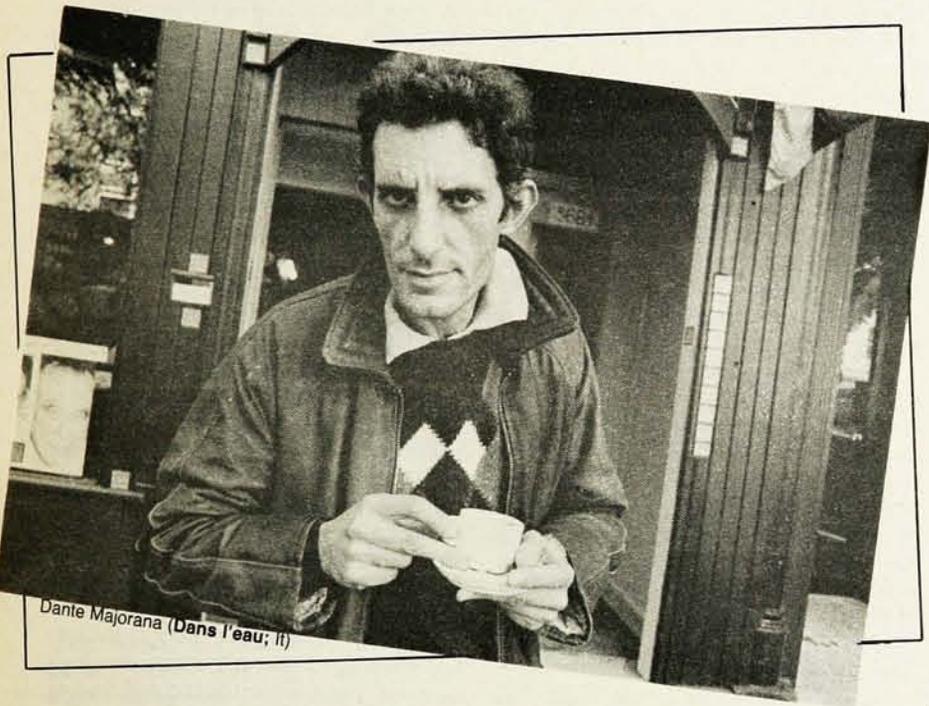
So what is it that makes these films different, what makes them *new*, aside from the fact that they've been produced in the last year? Perhaps a tendency to depend less upon plot and character development and more upon the exploration or creation of atmosphere: images abound of cars (dead or alive), fumes, lights, roads, concrete, pavement, wire. One preoccupation that seemed to recur was with the visual and aural assertion of an environment,



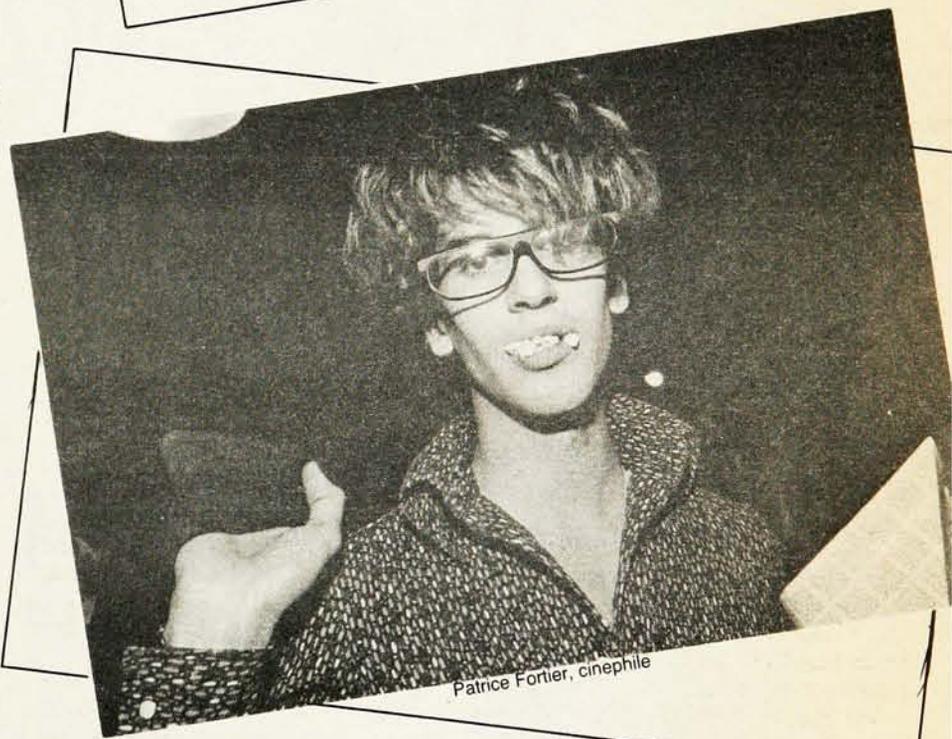
Irene Angelico (Dark Lullabies; Cda)



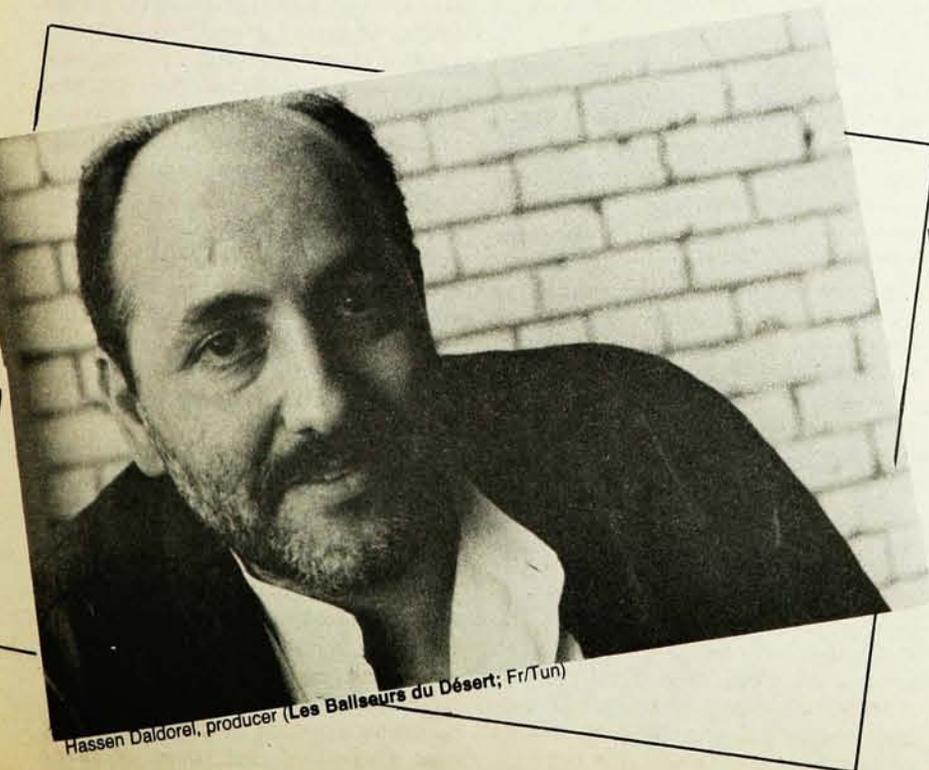
Howard Brookner, right (A Minute With Bob Wilson; UK/Fr/US)



Dante Majorana (Dans l'eau; It)



Patrice Fortier, cinephile

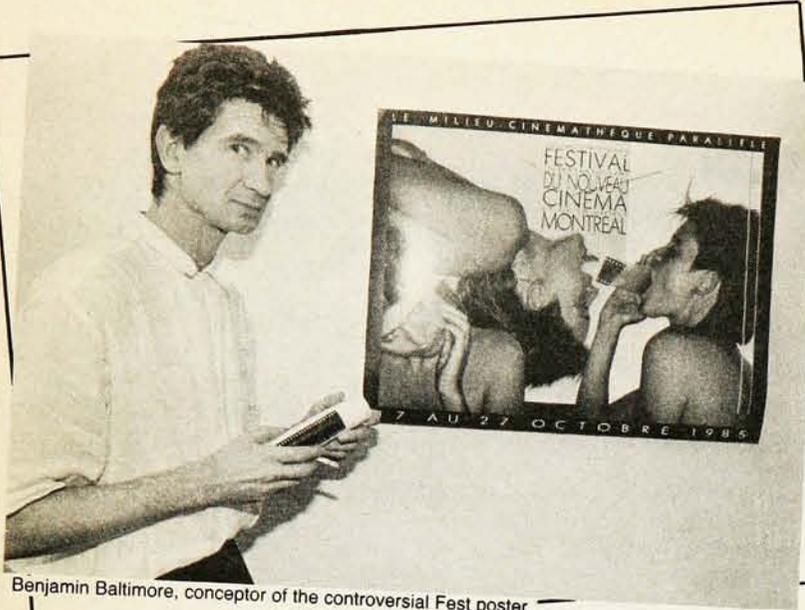


Hassen Daldorel, producer (Les Ballseurs du Désert; Fr/Tun)



Kim Masee, actress (L'Éveillé du Pont de l'Alma; Fr)

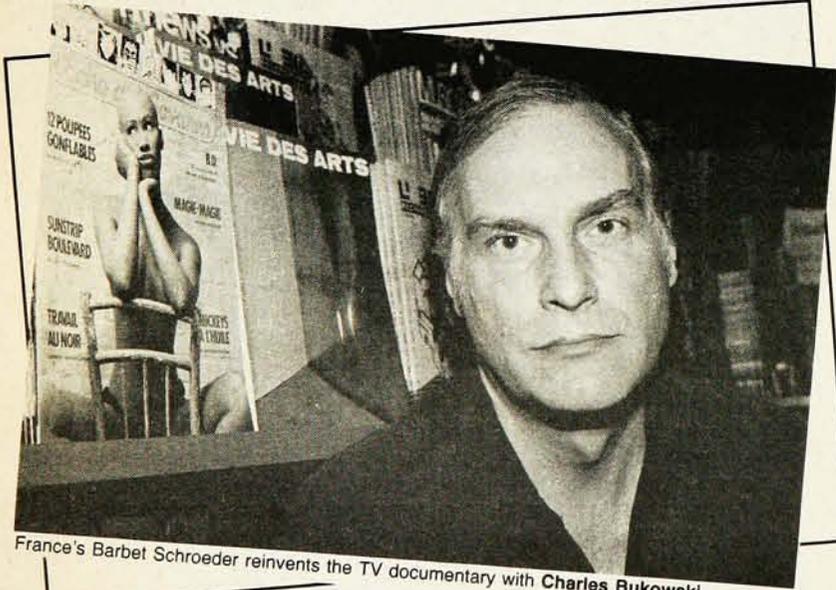
photos: Linda Dawn Hammond



Benjamin Baltimore, conceptor of the controversial Fest poster



The former Mrs. Wim Wenders, Ronee Blakley (Docudrama, U.S.A.)



France's Barbet Schroeder reinvents the TV documentary with Charles Bukowski



Fest director Claude Chamberlan: a breakthrough year

whether internal, external, natural or man-made. Sound is used in interesting ways to accomplish this, as in Jose Luis Guerin's beautifully but excruciatingly paced *Les Raisons de Berta* (Spain). A vast and empty landscape is balanced with the constant sound of wind blowing, howling, whistling. It is the ever-present, dominating element of the film, as is the sound of water, in all its resonances in the Italian short *Dans l'eau* by Dante Majorana.

Twenty-five-year-old Marcel Gisler takes us on an excursion through the city of Berlin in his documentary-styled *Voleurs de Jour* (FRG). We follow three young characters, Laurids, Lola, and Max, in their daily routines, establishing their lives amidst the bars, cafes, streets, apartments and music of modern Berlin. The film exudes the seeking, emptiness and aimlessness that envelopes their lives. A film dominated by shades of grey, the world it reflects is itself just shades of grey.

Raoul Ruiz' fantastic contribution, *Regime Sans Pain* (France), creates on many levels the same kind of atmosphere. Set in a futuristic/dream world that is a composite of artifacts, events and thoughts from the present and the past, the film is filled with hauntingly memorable scenes. Prince Jason runs through what appears to be a parking lot filled with, it seems, thousands, of immobile cars (a traffic jam), macabre and sinister characters reel by, smoke and fumes fill the air; there is no doubt we are caught in a world without reason. Is it a world of the future, the present, or of our worst nightmares?

In accord with the idea, Ruiz thankfully allows the camera to tilt and veer and angle. Ruiz plays not only with dialogue and drama, but with lighting, sound, and visual effect derived not from effects generators, but from an understanding and a willingness to push the medium to new possibilities. Ultimately that is where the development of film for the future lies - in the adaptation and use of cinematic conventions in new and novel ways.

Surprisingly, because so close to home, one of the most enjoyable films, for sheer inventiveness and exuberance, was the Québécois film *La couleur encerclée* by Jean and Serge Gagné. It flaunted and basically disregarded every artistic convention. Filled with bizarre situations, events and persons, this film, in its frenetic pace and continuous movement gives a true expression of the creative process. With its overriding question, "what is art?" (can it be contained in boxes, stored in warehouses, shipped in crates across borders and moved about by fork-lifts?), *La couleur encerclée* looks and feels and acts like an independently produced film, in its celebration of freedom from the constraints of commercial distribution.

But from all appearances, video is where today's trendy independent creators are taking stabs at new kinds of visual productions, and exploring the capabilities of the technologies. Video is different from film, and usually fails when it is used like film. An example is the 90-minute video *Quebec: Operation Lamda* by Marc Degryse. An intriguing idea, this video-film has very little of the visual power that one would expect from a futuristic story about love and politics. This lack is really the

result of an attempt to make a film on video, instead of using the many technical possibilities available in video production to create something completely novel.

There are videos being produced by young Canadians that do reflect a particular "video consciousness." Because they are not intimidated by film's 90 years of tradition, their work reflects a freedom and energy not as evident in current independent films. Bernard Hebert's video *Fiction* tells a story, but in such a way that all the video capabilities are utilized and the weaknesses compensated for. Imbalances in hue and color, editing and the chroma-key are used to produce some incredibly intriguing sequences that visually confuse fiction and fantasy.

Other Canadian artists, such as François Girard in *Le Train* and Steev Morgan in *Hands and Faces* and *A Bird Flew in My Window, I Had to Do Something*, are manipulating and working with all the tools available to them and producing a whole new kind of visual experience that is involving for the viewer. Video traditions so far only exist in television and in rock videos, both of which are parodied in the hilarious 10-minute video, *Come Fly With Sonny Day* by Fraser Finlayson of Toronto. Not as slick as Hebert's *Fiction*, this is nonetheless a good example of what can be done with the visual media compared to what is done with it.

It is all there - fantasy, fiction, parody, intrigue and humour; they can be produced on video without attempting to adapt the traditions of film. Videos like these are an assurance that work in this medium has only just begun and it has a wide-open future ahead.

Unfortunately, there was not the same assurance in the films programmed by the Festival. As enjoyable and pleasing to watch as many of them were, there was little that was provocative or convincingly demonstrating that film has new directions to go in.

If the future of independent filmmaking, judging by this year's festival, looks somewhat pale in contrast to the future of video-making, one must, in all honesty, wonder how that affects the future of the Festival of New Cinema and Video. Only the darkest pessimist would predict the death of independent filmmaking (because there will always be people making films, and there will always be people who want to see films, especially here in a film-fanatical city like Montreal). At the same time, as video production continues to grow and develop, it is likely that this section will become stronger. "1985 marked a breakthrough for the video section," reports Chamberlan of a part of the Festival which has been seeking an audience for the last four years.

So the Festival will continue successfully, if it remains a smaller, alternative festival. The 1986 International Festival of New Cinema and Video, set for Oct. 16-26, will see the reinstatement of the workshops and greater involvement from the merchants of Boulevard, St. Laurent, who also experienced the taste of success with 30,000 people milling about. Next year there will probably be just as much, and perhaps even more emphasis on the video part of the program. One can only hope that the '86 program will leave room for greater adventurousness in filmmaking.