

15th International Festival of Nouveau Cinema and Video:

Musings on Video



Absence

by Michael Dorland

"N'importe où, mais en dehors de ce monde" – Baudelaire
 "La nôtre est une époque opaque" – Montreal graffiti
 "That's enough. I want to sleep now" – Tess Payne, **The Flow of Appearances**

In a wonderfully provocative formulation, the philosopher Alexandre Kojève once wrote that the civilization of the West, in its post-historical phase, would not revert to barbarism but would instead attain a level of pure snobbery he termed "Japanization." This would be, Kojève argued, a form of gratuitous cultural suicide, emptied of all human content and replaced by totally formalized values.

Celebrating its fifteenth year of existence, the Festival international du nouveau cinéma et du vidéo (16-26 October) was a triumph of Japanization; that is to say, a 10-day celebration of excess in the snobbish pursuit of the superficial in our post-nouveau moment of diseased modernity.

In what must be a curiously Canadian response to the American (and French) domination of movie screens, Canada in the past decade or so developed a voracious hunger for film festivals. To such an extent that there is hardly a self-respecting village in Canada (that is, any place with a population of over 50 people) that does not have an international film festival of its own, upon which annually descend planeloads of movie-world vedettes, film auteurs, cannisters à gogo full of images of anywhere else but here, and battalions of journalists in desperate search of novelty of any kind. And Montreal, as a leading village, has not just one film festival but four, the two most important being Serge Losique's Montreal World Film Festival and Claude Chamberlan's International Festival of New Cinema and Video.

Each year both men vie against each other in relentless competition over films from other international film fests such as Cannes and funding from Canadian cultural agencies and corporate sponsors to bring to the village the latest and the best movies from anywhere else but here (though one or two from here are always thrown in for good measure) for the edification and pleasure of the masses of ever-increasing festivalgoers always eager to learn fresh visual lessons in the endless race of keeping up with the Modern. It's

been going on for 15 years now in the case of Chamberlan's festival (a 15-year story that would make a fascinating study in the institutionalization of film counter-culture) and for 10 in the case of Losique's. And, from the perspective of Japanization, it's getting boring.

As a result, signs of cultural boredom were clearly visible at this year's NC & V fest. The organization itself was, as always, friendly and helpful; the music that played before screenings was impeccably *dernier cri* stuff; and the general atmosphere, especially upstairs at Lola's Paradise, seemed to harken back to modern film's underground beginnings. The problem was not so much one of organizational details as much as general *déjà vu* in an overall cultural context that's out of joint.

Luc Perrault, *La Presse's* mild-mannered film critic, caught it very accurately in one of his articles (Oct. 20) on the fest entitled: *Du nouveau à tout prix* (The New, whatever the cost). While the fest was in full flight, *L'Œil Rechargeable* (The Reloadable Eye), a local cultural mag, hit the stands with an issue whose cover-story was entitled "Le syndrome de la nouveauté" (The Syndrome of the New). If we understand the Syndrome of the New (SN) as the cultural equivalent of AIDS, one gets a better grasp of the nature of the problem: namely, that visual modernity, because of its reckless promiscuity has propagated the secretion of international allergies that are causing it to rot from within.

While it's not yet called SN, the advertising industry, modernity's authentic avant-garde, has noticed an equivalent resistance in the broad masses of consumers who are so overloaded by visual messages that they've lapsed into a state of self-imposed blindness; they no longer see anything. The advertising industry's response, for instance, in Calvin Klein ads or in the ads for a perfume called Poison, has been an intensification of the simulacra of vitalism (the big signifiers of sex and death) in a desperate attempt to break through the opacity of resistance. In the case of the NC & V fest, the resistance took the form of a "Salon des Refusés" called the Festival international du nouveau rejects.¹ Held on October 23 by local filmmakers at the Main Film Co-op up the street from the festival, it protested the rejection of films by the festival organization on the grounds of the festival 1) not supporting local – particularly experimental – filmmaking, although it is a publicly

funded festival, 2) programming arbitrariness, 3) excessively high entry fees and 4) double standards in terms of the festival's own rules, particularly with respect to Canadian content. The protest, a healthy outburst of artistic anarchy, was a reminder to a festival, which once had strong roots in the local film culture and a glorious tradition of gutsy experimentation, that there may be other approaches to film or videomaking outside the monolithic spectacle of International Modernism's tiresome attempts to swallow its own spectral tail.

However, because it was the fest's 15th birthday, a date that fest director Chamberlan hailed James Deanishly as "the classical age" and festival postermeister Benjamin Baltimore consecrated visually with his poster classicizing 42 filmmakers within Roman arches, it seemed like a good idea to leave film wallowing in the decline of its imperium and instead go check out some of the 51 videos from 19 countries at the fest's fifth anniversary of its video section, especially when TV now claims to be the most powerful medium of mass communications. And all the more so because programmer Thrassy Giatsios, at the fest's opening press conference, had claimed that the videos programmed reflected a powerful "critique" of television. In his introduction to the video section in the festival program, Giatsios made the more cautious (and more accurate) claim that video is a "new concept of television product," less a critique of TV than a play for airtime by a new brunch of image producers. That is to say, the same old Modernist song-and-dance, but on Sony Trinitrons instead of in self-reflexive movies.

The most interesting thing about a Sony Trinitron, at least the ones at the fest, was only visible when the monitor is off. It's an opaque mirror, like a spaceman's helmet or mirror sunglasses. You can't see in and it metallicly reflects back a fish-eye view of whatever's going on. In other words, there's no need whatsoever to turn the thing on: it's "on" already, videating, turning whatever's there into a contained surface. What it reflects back is superficial; just as the videating image itself is superficial, and totally so. The beauty of a Sony Trinitron, then, is that it is complete in itself; it's pure form, pure "Japanization." Other than boredom there is no need to turn it on, and when it is turned on, you won't see anything more than superficial imaging, reflecting upon its own superficiality which can, of course,

become quite complicated, but nothing more. In this sense, the most accurate video program the festival could have mounted would have been a room full of "off" monitors. But that's been done already, as has been a room full of "on" monitors watching each other. However, as modernist culture exists within the pretense it can keep people from experiencing their boredom, you've got to show pictures, even if those pictures say the same thing. As the voice-over in Robert Ashley and Lawrence Lemak Brickman's *Atalanta Strategy* (U.S.A., 1986, 27 min.), deservedly awarded the best video prize at fest's end, put it: "If you don't turn that TV on, I'm going to throw it out."

The titles usually give away the strategies employed which are those familiar to Modernism (perspectival illusionism, image paranoia, self-paranoia, bodily paranoia, obliteration of memory/space/time/everything, the fallacy of nature, the horrors/delights of technology and, last but not least, the miseries of artists in the TV age). Thus *Absence* (Susan Rynard, Canada, 1986, 5 min.), *Alter Image* (Andrew Logan, Sankai Juku, David Mach, Britain, 1983), *À Propos Peinture* (Daniel Dion, Su Schnee, Canada, 1985, 17 min.), *As If Memories Could Deceive Me* (Marcel Odenbach, U.S., 1986, 17 min.), *As Seen on TV* (David Rimmer, Canada 1986, 15 mins.), *Azimut* (Klaus von Bruch, FRG, 1985, 6 min.), *Candido Kantor – Qu'ils crèvent les artistes!* (Giancarlo Soldi, Italy, 1985, 50 min.), *Flaubert Dreams of Travel (But His Mother's Illness Prevents Him)* Ken Kobland, U.S., 1986, 20 min.) etc. all toy with such modernist subversions, be it gently (*À Propos Peinture*), gratingly (*As Seen on TV*) or bizarrely (*Flaubert Dreams*).

The general strategy, given the medium, is surfacization or the recognition that what is being dealt with is a modular surface. This was particularly evident in the Japanese tapes, notably a tape entitled *Mt. Fuji* in which various computer-driven surfaces of photos of the mountain cut through the trunks of trees or rise up through the stalks of bamboo-shoots, and in Japanese-subsidized work such as Kit Fitzgerald's *Adelic Penguins* (U.S., 1986, 34 min.).

But because surfacization is reductive (i.e., sooner or later it gets boring), the surface has to legitimize its flatness by an encounter with a human signifier, in most cases a naked woman, in order to

gain the semblance of emotional depth. This is done with striking effectiveness by Peter Greenaway in his *A TV Dante* (Britain, 1986, 14 min.), a stunning instance of the legitimization of the TV form by literary content (Dante's *Inferno*). Here a naked female representing lust is superimposed with flames that "burn" through her features. But these are cold TV flames that do not burn, and besides the "woman" is also only an image. Or in the German tape *Philo-Mytho-Clips "Dancing Eury-nome"* (Gabor Body, FRG, 1985, 3 min.), the interplay of surfaces (dancing naked woman, a boa constrictor and an egg) are conjoined and become symbols, to which can be added a variety of signs (here Japanese characters), all of which are now rendered capable of symbolic interpretation (e.g., this tape

is about the Genesis myth). However, if you're too bored to be bothered with interpretation, there's always other tapes to look at.

The Canadian tapes were on the whole... Canadian, that is to say, philosophical and/or documentary. Philosophical tapes included, in addition to those already mentioned, Mark Verabioff's *Crossing the 49th* (1985, 9 min.), a fantasy about Canada as a homosexual nation, Tess Payne's *The Flow of Appearances* (1986, 14 min.) about the flow of appearances, Christian Morrison's *School of Thought* (1986, 15 min.) which prompted the people sitting behind me to quite unfairly castigate it with the words "boring and gloomy," the kiss of death these days, if an aptly Canadian comment upon things Canadian. Documentary tapes, in

general about contemporary forms of martyrdom, included Ron Hallis' *Iran: Adrift In a Sea of Blood* (Canada/Iran 1986, 25 min.), *Monsieur Léon* (François Girard, 1986, 13 min.), a study in vagueness, *On tourne à St-Jean Port Joli* (Alain Cadieux, 1986, 11 min.) on videoclip wars, and Marie-Hélène Cousineau's *Du Potlatch, l'odeur de l'huile* (1986, 30 min.), a very intelligent piece of counter-culture reporting on the lack of serious cultural journalism either in the Montreal press or on the state TV. And that, folks, was that in terms of representation from the host country at the fest.

(Feature filmwise, there were three Canadian entries: Dorothy Todd Hénault's *Firewords*, Leon Marr's *Dancing In The Dark*, which already played at the Toronto fest and accord-

ing to fest rules should therefore not have been eligible, and the Gagné brothers' *La Couleur enclerclée* which at 100 minutes long, having been cut down already from six hours and three hours respectively, is still a tissue of dreadful incoherence despite some nice color computer graphics work on an Atari.)

There's not much to conclude other than the cliché that current videowork, at least as reflected at the fest, is indeed alternative television. Some of it is quite brilliant (my two personal favorites were Greenaway's *Dante* and Ashley's *Atalanta Strategy*), much of it is thoroughly competent - I didn't see a thing that was outrightly lousy work, and more of it probably deserves to be on TV. If only to provide relief from the boredom of what is on TV.

Interview with Claude Chamberlan and Dimitri Eipedes

by Peter Wintonick

CLAUDE CHAMBERLAN. BORN 8 JUNE 1949. QUEBECOIS. PAST LIFE AS ROCK SINGER-SOLOIST. GENERAL COORDINATOR OF UNDERGROUND FILM CENTRE. PRESIDENT AND GENERAL COORDINATOR OF THE COOPERATIVE DES CINEASTES INDEPENDANTS. FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DU CINEMA EN 16MM. FILM DISTRIBUTOR, EDITOR, CONCEPTUALIST, SOCIO-CULTURAL ANIMATOR, ACTOR, ADMINISTRATOR, PUBLICIST, GRAPHIST, PRODUCER-DIRECTOR, EXISTENTIALIST, CO-FOUNDER OF THE MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF NEW CINEMA AND VIDEO.

DIMITRI EIPIDES. BORN ATHENS, GREECE 47 YEARS AGO. SCHOOLED IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA IN THEATRE AND CINEMA. TEACHER, WRITER, LIVES HERE AND THERE, CO-FOUNDER OF THE FESTIVAL OF NEW CINEMA AND VIDEO.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY PETER WINTONICK WITH THE ORGANIZERS OF THE MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF NEW CINEMA AND VIDEO DURING THE FESTIVAL.

Cinema Canada: *What is it that has made the festival survive as it has for 15 years?*

Claude Chamberlan: It's very simple. It's our love. Our determination to diffuse video and cinema. To offer first of all an important window for innovative filmmaking and subsequently to hope that this kind of work will be distributed and produced. It provokes in a way new producers, new filmmakers. It's a catalyst on all levels: people who have been dormant emerge who are willing to take a risk.

Cinema Canada: *How would you define the nouveau cinema?*

Dimitri Eipedes: We define it as cinema that comes from people that are immediately concerned with evolution, with creative, political and social change; they have something to express and bring forward to the public - something personal - motivated by themselves with the least possible interference from outside factors such as concerns for profit.

Claude Chamberlan: We mainly deal with personal or group work that deal with innovative ideas, original treatment in documentary, narrative and non-narrative form. In video now too, because video has replaced the earlier experiments in film.

Any new development in ideas that could refresh the media, that touch new

sensibilities, awareness in every possible corner of your body, of your soul.

Cinema Canada: *When you read the list of who has been here, or have sent films or really supports the festival, it's quite impressive. Chantal Akerman, Werner Schroeter, Michael Snow, Wim Wenders, Raoul Ruiz, Margarite Duras, Jean-Luc Godard. What brings these people/these films here?*

Claude Chamberlan: It's very simple. We chose 50 films and as much video. We look after them one by one. OK? So it's a moderate approach in order to 'market' every film in time and in space in the best possible way. We have a fantastic press service that works on each and every film. We have 40-50 press screenings before the festival starts, which is unheard of. We are a festival with "research" as our anthem. We are forcing doors open to create video critics because there are none.

Secondly, we concentrate very much on exchange so people can meet. Many people who live in other cities or even in the same cities come here to meet each other.

We're a catalyst in that sense also. We provoke the meetings of people of all walks of film life. We're trying to make it in the most intimate way - approaching the public. So we do several things that big festivals with a large number of films, 200-250 films, cannot do.



Claude Chamberlan, Dimitri Eipedes and Thrassyvoulos Giatzos

Cinema Canada: *I've tried to go to some public screenings and I've had to stand up - it's been quite incredible - at strange hours. How has the festival developed to be a popular/populist festival as well as an esoteric/aesthetic one as well? Is the audience developing?*

Dimitri Eipedes: Yes, you can say that. As we all know independent films that five years ago might have been considered too "off-beat" to be seen even at this festival are large commercial successes. The public has also advanced, has become more demanding and cultivated, and more interested in this kind of cinema. They support it more.

Claude Chamberlan: The recognition of our work is international. We have a tougher time here in Canada.

Cinema Canada: *You've had problems with funding from the cultural cinematic institutions.*

Claude Chamberlan: Well, we've had a number of fights in the past. Their idea of a festival is Cannes. I guess we've proved otherwise.

Cinema Canada: *You proved your point by getting hundreds of letters of support from the Quebec filmmaking community. Are the bureaucracies part of the problem we find for Canadian cinema?*

Meanwhile, those who are still waiting around after 90 years of cinema history for images that will change the world, might do worse than read McLuhan's gloss on that impeccable modernist Flaubert. In from *Cliché to Archetype*, McLuhan's dictionary of received ideas, one can find under the entry on "the crisis of the cliché", the following words of comfort:

Despair is often the result produced by an uncontrollable quantity of data. The difficulty of ordering the data produces a sense of being stuck in an impasse. The accumulation and acceleration of information techniques risks plunging us all into such a state at any moment. However, when a situation so weighed down by data reaches a point of crisis, a reversal often occurs in which all the details vanish...



David Rimmer's *As Seen on TV*

To end on just such a cliché, then, here's to next year's festival.

1/ Screenings at the Festival du Nouveau Rejets included, from local filmmakers, Byron Black's *Three Towers* (video, 18 min.), Claude Ouellet's *Ragged Clown* (16mm, 25 min.), Rick Hancox's *Beach Events* (16mm, 8 min.), Loela Wali's *Anso* (8mm, 16 min.), Julian Samuels' *Dictators* (16mm 6 min.), Cynthia Jervis, Susan Lebrun and Velcrow Ripper's *No Means No* (video, 23 min.), Mark Morganstern's *Illumination* (16mm, 10 min.), and Karen Rowden's *No Title* (video, 4 min.). Samuels' and Hancox's films were not rejected, but were included as sympathetic protests. The international section of rejets included Carlos Ferrand's *Fenêtres sur ça* (16mm, 20 min.), Amy Melnick's *First Winter* (16mm, 20 min.), Alan Quinn's *If I was a Dog* (16mm, 3 min.), John Greyson's *A Maffie Called Simon* (16mm, 15 min.) and Flying Disc Productions' *Crowsfeet Dance Collective* (16mm, 30 min.).

Claude Chamberlan: It changes. Now it's all right. There's an opening towards the future. They should want to try to continue to develop and understand what is really happening with the new creators.

Cinema Canada: Is it because of the recent success of Quebec/Canadian cinema in the international sphere or is it attitudinal change, or is it simply changes in personnel?

Dimitri Eipides: I don't know what it is. Perhaps they're realizing that the policies that were established in the '70s have not worked. I personally believe very strongly that all that effort toward the big industry set Canadian cinema back 10 years.

Cinema Canada: What is the reason there are only three Canadian films in the festival? What are the weaknesses with Canadian cinema?

Claude Chamberlan: There's more than three. There are three features, a number of shorts and quite a few videos. The ones we were really after will be finished this winter. The others have already been seen this year, or have opened commercially by now.

Cinema Canada: Are you seeing in your viewing of our own film production any strengths or weaknesses, tendencies or trends, any potential?

Claude Chamberlan: I am personally on the side of our cinema. I'm more supportive, more inclined to be tolerant. In years before we used to have a Quebec series, and a Canadian series in film and video. Now it's time we put the films side by side with other international productions. In the past we had to have a special place for it so it would exist but now it's maturing. Now everything is on the same level. It's an International Festival. Some years there are less. Some years more. That's the way it is, you know. Because we have a direct link with Rotterdam or Berlin's Forum we're closely knit and watch each other's programming, we are in a good position to promote our filmmakers abroad.

Cinema Canada: Do you see any promise? Any new risk takers? People to watch?

Claude Chamberlan: You have several examples of them.

It seems that in tough times it hap-

pens. There are some very good new people here Quebec. Producers. Videomakers.

Cinema Canada: In the work of these people are there similarities, linkage, continuities, qualities, emerging ideas which say, "This is a Quebecois film" or "This is a Canadian film."

Claude Chamberlan: There is none. It's to come. Still after 20 years, the magic of an *auteur*, which could be instantly and universally recognized, or of a school of filmmakers, is not here yet. We're still waiting. We're here to promote that. It could happen in film or video.

Dimitri Eipides: But, you can't be pessimistic about Canadian cinema. Up to now there are individual cases of a good film that gets exposure to markets abroad but it's for us to find and develop new talent. But you cannot claim there is a movement. Nothing widespread over the decades. It doesn't exist here yet.

Cinema Canada: Why?

Both: Bureaucracy. Lack of official encouragement. Lack of distribution. A lack of support for those fantastic people with something new to propose in distribution. Animation. Ciné-Clubs. That can be the important formative force.

Cinema Canada: A film culture?

Claude Chamberlan: Exactly. And that lack of support has been dreadful.

Cinema Canada: It continues to be dreadful.

Claude Chamberlan: I hope that the situation will change through our collective action. I'm optimistic.

Cinema Canada: In terms of those formative people - or those who claim they are - I saw this pamphlet on the wall. It's written by young, independent Montreal filmmakers. They feel marginal. They feel left out.

The poster reads, in part:

"Films and videos in the 'Festival du Nouveau Rejets' were rejected from either the "World Film Festival" or the Festival International du Nouveau Cinéma et de la Vidéo, this summer. We've decided to pick on the latter because it claims to support young and independent filmmakers. It doesn't.

As broke filmmakers, a \$50.00 (non-

refundable) registration fee is unacceptable. The one man selection process is undemocratic, and elitist. Our films are not chic European, chic American or even chic Canadian. They are, for the most part, homegrown products. The New Film Festival is not a bad festival. However, we feel that in a festival of this size (with a large government subsidy) we deserve representation. There are only three features mentioned in the programme guide; in general there has been little emphasis on Canadian content in any of the publicity etc."

- from a poster found tacked to the wall of the National Film Board.

Claude Chamberlan: Let me deal with this. This comes down to individuals. It has nothing to do with cinema but only their own personal publicity. On the question of the fee - I explained to them that we have a very small budget. If they didn't have the money, I would go to see them to screen their work. I went and saw a film. I didn't like it at all. It was a conservative TV treatment - very ordinary and I told him - because I'm very straightforward, that I didn't like the film for such and such a reason. I'm very hard. I don't go 25 ways. That's the way I am. I could make a mistake - everybody does - but I have a pretty small margin of error protest now. They agreed that the treatment was ordinary. This by is real bullshit. It's a personal ego whatever. I have no consideration for that.

Cinema Canada: They might be missing analysis here but is there not some validity to their criticism? Do they not represent the marginal?

Claude Chamberlan: The other criticism they make is of Dimitri and me choosing the films programmed. We take full and sole responsibility to choose every film we have. Which I think is very honest. We did it with a selection committee before. (Interviewer's note: I worked as a programmer one year.) There was too much confusion and I didn't agree with half of the films we had. That answers that.

Dimitri Eipides: I think the poster is fun but what I object to very much is that they are using the festival as a forum for self-promotion. It's physically impossible that every film be accepted or that our criteria would be very different for the filmmakers of this area and that we have different standards for

those selected from abroad. That's unfair. So we do have a certain solid idea about what the festival can promote and what it doesn't feel is worth promoting. They can do their thing but they shouldn't run down the festival - it's sour grapes. They find the opportunity for 24 hours to become the stars of the street. Good for them, let them enjoy it. If they were serious about it they would be more supportive because really the possibilities are here. By attacking the festival they get nothing.

Cinema Canada: Is there anything of legitimacy?

Claude Chamberlan: Just a minute. When they say we only screen three Quebec/Canadian films they mean three features. Their own films are short films. It seems inconsistent. These filmmakers have no support. They are very marginal.

(Interviewer's note: I went to see some of these nouveau rejets that very same evening. And while I admire the filmmakers' attitudes and energies, it seems that the films and videos that I saw there, with the possible exception of *No Means No*, a tape about rape and Julian Samuels' politicomic film *Dictators*, there was nothing much to write home about, let alone write about. I'd seen it all before, somewhere, someplace, somelifetime. Perhaps there can be a continuous programme at The Parallel cinema featuring these works or a more organized festival of films internationally rejected from the festivals of the world. Any organizers?)

Cinema Canada: I want to talk about the future of film in this country, and the future tendencies of film around the world. I asked Wim Wenders once if film was dead. Is it?

Dimitri Eipides: No, there's a future. There's also a crisis.

Claude Chamberlan: But there's always a crisis. Whatever it is called. Photographic cinema on celluloid. Electronic cinema on magnetic band or for that matter on laser disk, or holographic cinema which will come in 50 years. For me, it's history repeating itself. It's up to us, for whomever fights for this kind of free expression of beauty and quality and innovation that we call new cinema. It's for us to refine the means of producing and distributing these films. A future is there if we're ready to adapt to the demands of the present.