"A work of art is good if it has grown out of necessity."

Rilke

"If you do not get it from yourself, where will you go for it?"

-Zen poem

The invitation to the opening press conference for the 7th Annual Rendez-vous du cinema québécois said MOLSON in big letters across the top of the page.

I went to O'Keefe's conference room instead. After all, they had just bought each other and I had time to kill.

May as well get lost. CBC Radio had on a gentleman who claimed subliminal suggestion really worked. I got to the right place and saw the sign saying MOLSON (if I use the word MOLSON once more I win a free case of something) and saw Réjean Houle, ex-Montreal Canadian GREAT, checking his coat. He always looks so young.

By the time I got upstairs, my film had not won a single prize. Someone did not my way, as if to congratulate me. The film continued to not win a prize throughout the event.

The poster was nice.

Rick Raxlen's first feature film, Horses in Winter (co-produced with Patrick Vallenty) was presented at the 7th annual Rendez-vous du cinema québécois where it did not win a prize.

They made us listen to speeches and see clips from possible prizewinners before they allowed us to line up for food. I lined up too late and could barely see the laden tables at the far end of the hall. Went home. Had a ham sandwich. Read the Vegetarian Times. Worried about anything I could think of.

Very high on the list of least attractive films: the Quebec-Belgium co-produced feature animation: Bino Fable.

I took my five-year-old and my 16-year-old, sat in the first row and was ready. Nothing. Clay uncharming things on coke-bottle-bottom-shaped trunks, waving stubby arms, and Bino, a distant cousin of Pee-Wee Herman scratched his bleached curly blond hair A LOT and this piece of clear plexiglass shaped like a crescent moon (Clair de Lune) kept dying and being brought back from the grave about six times and finally after an hour we all got up and left and the five-year-old went: "WHEW!! and I knew what she meant.

Growing, growing, gone...

A while ago, once upon a time, the Rendez-vous consisted of 41 films. That was in 1982. This year there were 101 films that qualified. Get it? Full 101, 101 films—everything is so political—I guess this was a little joke maybe. So in six years the Quebec film industry has doubled its output.

A vast number of the films were made with the help of SOGIC, the provincial film funding...
agency and/or Telefilm and/or the NFB. The Canada Council’s name appeared, as did universities, colleges; all the films seemed to have been approved by someone along the way. Official sponsorship was to be seen and felt. Most of the films felt ‘sponsored’ in the way that meant ‘exterior forces’ were strong. There was money available, that was number one. You had to come up with an idea to access the money. Two. The idea had to be within a certain range of expression, presumably not too personal, too obscure. Hopefully commercial in some form or other. Market-driven. At the very least, capable of being seen, understood, distributed.

At the NFB in the ’60s and ’60s and ’70s, there were films ‘sponsored’ by the department of Agriculture or Health and Welfare or External Affairs or Defence. They often had big budgets and one could travel to exotic places and shoot lots of feet of film. Me, I never made one. Not sure why; didn’t want to; maybe too busy. It was a kind of plum. One had to be good at dealing with complex issues. Such as other people’s personalities.

At Concordia University, there was a course started in 1980 in response (partially) to those students of the fine art of filmmaking who didn’t want to work in large-crew situations. It was called Studio I and you got a Bolex or Super 8 but no sync cameras; budgets were small; the university helped to some extent but not as many dollars went to Studio I as to Filmmaking II and III, basically apprentice-type courses for the industry. Were we a fine art school or an apprentice program? We were both apparently. Kind of. But the apprentice side was, je ne sais quoi, sexier.

...our error lies in the perception of pattern but in automatically imbuing patterns with meaning, especially with meaning that can bring us comfort or distil confusion...”


So let’s “match to type”.

There’s the guys and women who made “sponsored” films, who make sponsored film; there is the class of students who believe filmmaking involves one person, one camera, one thousand dollars and the other classical working in crews of 20 at the university level and having peak experiences.

Then there are those films at the Rendez-vous made by creëstes who CARE and those who DON’T REALLY CARE.

But we all care. Ask us. We really do. Honest. I believe you. You are not making films to pay the rent or put food on the table or be a big star or keep your brain busy and happy. I must take your word. But there were some films that felt, FELT like they cared more.

And now I have to tell you their names because I want to argue for a kind of filmmaking that is hopelessly dying, that wears its heart on its sleeve.

Films made with lots of care: L’Étranger; Kidnapped; Lamento pour un homme de lettres; Le Grand monde; Drame spécial; Alias Will James; A Nice Day in the Country; Abijeev; Sugarplums; La Lettre d’amour and Les Ecrits perdus.

There were others too. But let us start with these 11. It is probably safe to say this is addressed more to directors, writers, and producers; it is assumed technicians, by their very lifestyles, care enough.

Suddenly, there are CareBears all over my typewriter; when I close my eyes those little fuzzy inventions of Hallmark haunt my eyelids... help. How does one know if one (perhaps) qualifies. Set your alarm for three a.m. in the morning. Get up. Ask yourself this question: if they didn’t give me the money, would I make the film anyways? If yes is your answer, go back to sleep. Dream of sugarplums. If no is your answer, stay awake until six a.m. Think about it. Make a cup of coffee at seven a.m.; continue to think about “IT.”

Abijeev and Lamento pour un homme de lettres deal with particles of Quebec.

Abijeev (33mm, color, 29 min, 40 sec), by Andrée Dumais, uses old black and white footage of maps, and trains arriving in the Abitibi region, bringing settlers. Colonization was encouraged by the Church. We then cut to a car travelling – the interior of a car looking out a snowstorm. The passengers are coming from a screening of films by Abbé Proulx... and are heading home. With them, we stare out the window at the snow blowing against the windshield and listen to a long poetic narration and tiny bits of song and weather off the radio. A truck passes. The film looks black and white. Snow falls. Night. Abijeev is intent on being the movie, does not try to be anything else. Not two things at once. This is, as someone said to me, “anti-television.” “We know someone is directing this. This film doesn’t care if it’s liked or not.

Dramaihe has this idea, see, so you watch and listen, and it leaves you hot or cold or thinking about how snow looks when you drive at night for hours. Alone, on a country road. The use of close-ups of wipers, headlights, car window surface with snowflakes melting – these seem integrated into the telling and not added for “effect”. The soft hypnotic swish of the wiper against the wet window is always there. This was a striking, poetic, felt piece of filmmaking.

In Lamento pour un homme de lettres (30 minutes, director: Pierre Jutras; distribution: Films du Crayons), the images are saved from themselves by the director’s love of his subject and for cinema itself. Carlos Ferrand did the camera work. Very nice, very nice. When interviewed on the radio, he said Jutras had been planning the film for 10 years. It looks like it and feels like it.

The film is superficially about Albert Laberge, who was a sports journalist at the Montreal daily La Presse and author of La Soumire and an unfinished work, Lamento. The subject of the film seems to be about filmmaking. We are addressed directly by the actors. There are clips from a black and white wrestling film of the ’50s. Shots trick us: lovely painted backdrops are raised and actors walk into ‘real’ nature. The body of a horse is examined in extreme close-up as it stands in a snowy landscape. Jutras had found an anti-hero or hero and elevated him, then devoted this film to him. Are we to feel sorry for Mr. Laberge’s poor life? Admire...
him? Care about what happened to this real person? Albert becomes an important person because Jutras has willed him back into existence.

Main Film Inc, a Montreal coop, weighed in with four films. Three of them were by first- and second-time filmmakers and showed that Main Film is alive and well. Sylvain L'Espérance's Les Écrans perdus; black and white, 10 min. made me scratch my head for the first five minutes but it finds a way to go and at the end I wanted more. The sequences involving a man cutting slices from a rock to make arrow-heads put me in mind of some of Arthur Lipsett's imagery.

Éclipses, directed by Denis Langlois (23 minutes. color and black and white, from a story by Lucie Lambert), is an attempt to deconstruct a narrative structure involving memory, played out in fast-food joints, the metro and other imperative venues. L'homme nu (Guylaire Roy, 35mm., 10 min. black and white) is a brave attempt to break from some forms and yet walk the line with narrative elements. The poetic aspects could have been increased and the prose-like elements done away with; it wants to be all things to all people — opening images of clouds passing its shadowed shapes over a fully landscape and a shot of a shadow of a baby skirting the frame are ascertaining to a possibility that is only hinted at; both Langlois and Roy show they want to expand the process of storytelling. I look forward to their next films.

La lettre d'amour (P. Hébert, 35mm, 16 min., color) The Wanderer (G. Umar) and Nice Day in the Country (C. Hinton, 8 minutes, 23 sec., color, 35mm) were all animated films that stood out. La lettre d'amour should be seen by etchers and silkscreen artists and lithographers; big, beautiful scratched 35mm frames, colored subtly, keep rolling by the eye; these are intercut with brief clips of black and white from a performance piece. Gorgeous.

Le voleur/The Wanderer is as dark and sombre as a Poe short story. A stranger appears on a hill above a peaceful village. He descends and weasels a kind of roommate to death; thirst, drunkenness and desolation are all that remain. Done in stark black and white tones, based on a story by Michel Tremblay, it is strong cinema, and its imagery remains fresh in my mind.

Nice Day In The Country, is animation for the fun of it, if animating things can ever be considered fun. A loving couple decide to go on a picnic in the country; they can't get out of their house. The door is magically stuck shut. Many silly things happen. It put me in mind of Dick Tracy characters, especially one called Fly-face (he always had a swarm of flies in front of his face, leaving little trails in the air). Hinton draws the air, it is full of squiggly things (bugs? germs?) All life in his world is surrounded by energetic squids.

"Before you can be accepted as muse into the Brotherhood of Light, you must first resource the world and its works. Specifically, the doctrines of the orthodox non-believing fathers: producers, distributors, exhibitors, critics...cachets, professional movements, and all those who condemn acts of vision as form of heresy. They are terrified by visual phenomena, by personal statement... by anything marred by the touch of the artist's own hand."

— James Broughen, Seeing The Light (City Lights Books)

We can't all be lucky enough to be working on a film that "means" something to us, but we should try very, very hard to be in that position as often as possible.

Quebec Cinema now was thought (by a panel of critics on the last day) to be non-violent, concerned with the people on the margins; it was found to be a cinema dealing with inter-generational conflicts. Parent-child, father-son, father was very present. Mom was missing by and large. It was suggested that, as always, the films were too long and sometimes without merit cinematically. A number of films dealt with people living in vacuums, looking for answers, arriving at dead-ends, looking for a new life. One critic suggested Quebec films were non-judgmental. They tried to understand the world around them; there were no good guys and bad guys; there was an absence of chaussinism. Women were not "dolls."

Moi. I fell very few of the films had to be made. The forces that manifested each film seemed "exterior" to the director/writer; films got made because the money was there, the time slot was there, it is full of squiggly things (bugs? germs?) All life in his world is surrounded by energetic squids.

The poetic aspects could have been increased and the narrative developed more. A number of films were too long and sometimes without merit cinematically. A number of films dealt with people living in vacuums, looking for answers, arriving at dead-ends, looking for a new life.

One critic suggested Quebec films were non-judgmental. They tried to understand the world around them; there were no good guys and bad guys; there was an absence of chaussinism. Women were not "dolls."

"Before you can be accepted as muse into the Brotherhood of Light, you must first resource the world and its works. Specifically, the doctrines of the orthodox non-believing fathers: producers, distributors, exhibitors, critics...cachets, professional movements, and all those who condemn acts of vision as form of heresy. They are terrified by visual phenomena, by personal statement... by anything marred by the touch of the artist's own hand."

— James Broughen, Seeing The Light (City Lights Books)

We can't all be lucky enough to be working on a film that "means" something to us, but we should try very, very hard to be in that position as often as possible.

Quebec Cinema now was thought (by a panel of critics on the last day) to be non-violent, concerned with the people on the margins; it was found to be a cinema dealing with inter-generational conflicts. Parent-child, father-son, father was very present. Mom was missing by and large. It was suggested that, as always, the films were too long and sometimes without merit cinematically. A number of films dealt with people living in vacuums, looking for answers, arriving at dead-ends, looking for a new life. One critic suggested Quebec films were non-judgmental. They tried to understand the world around them; there were no good guys and bad guys; there was an absence of chaussinism. Women were not "dolls."

CINEMA CANADA

MARCH - APRIL 1989