

The seventh year itch

Horsing around at the Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois

BY RICK RAXLEN

"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 cinéma 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 Canadien 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 nod 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 Valley) was presented at the 7th annual Rendez-vous du cinéma 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 Fabule*.

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.

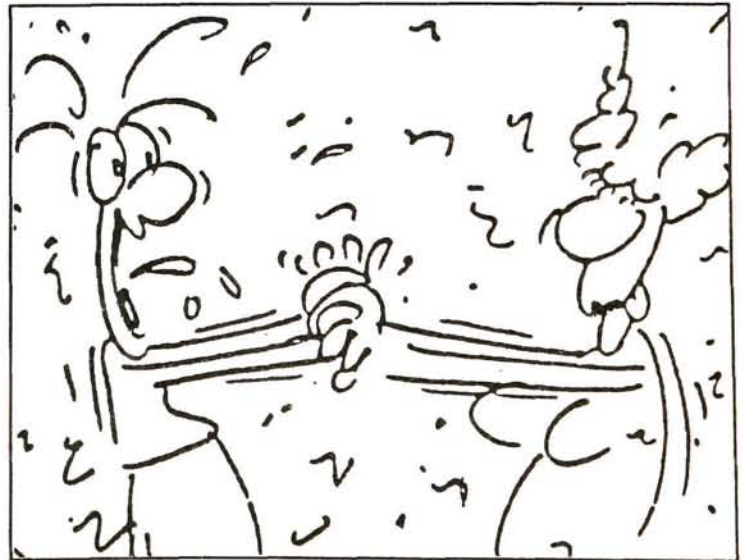
Growing, growing, gone...

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? Bill 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



George Ungar's *L'Étranger*, from a story by Michel Tremblay



Christopher Hinton's *Nice Day in the Country*

agency and/or Telefilm and/or the NFB. The Canada Council's name appeared, as did universities, cegeps; 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 '50s 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 a 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 synch 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 not in the perception of pattern but in automatically imbuing pattern with meaning, especially with meaning that can bring us comfort or dispel confusion."*

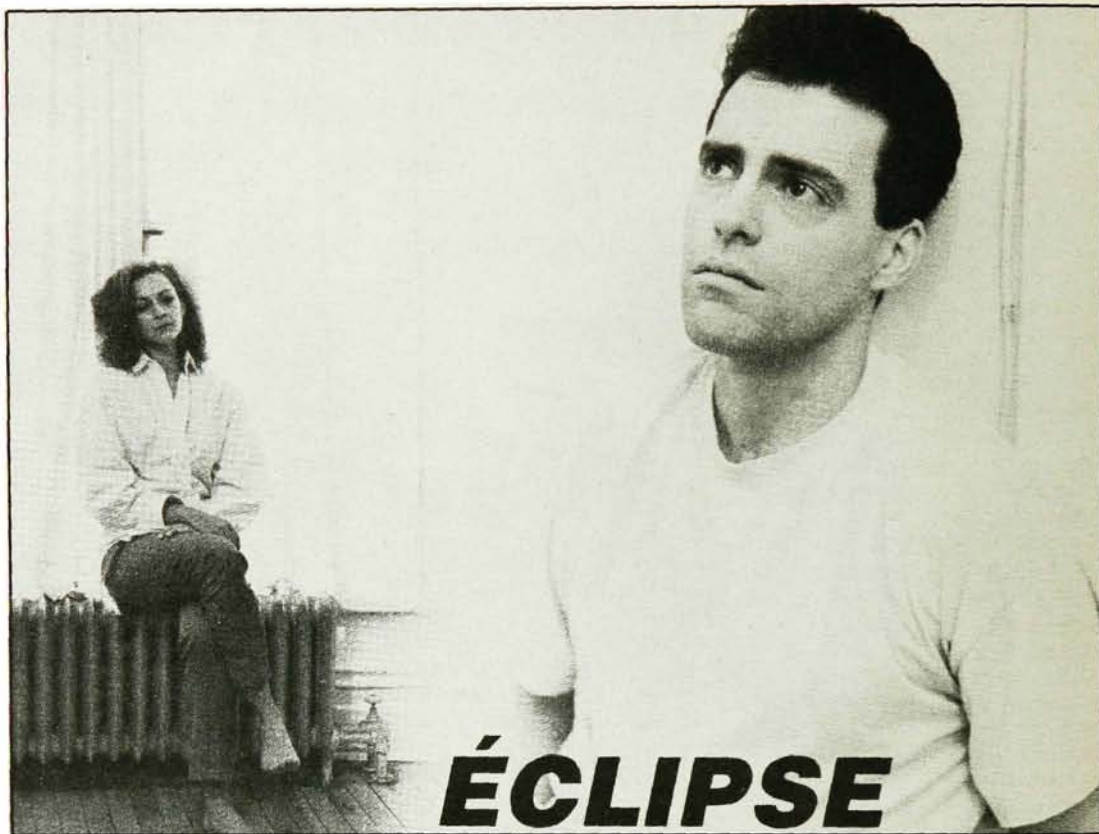
(Stephen Jay Gould)

"... our minds are not built (for whatever reason) to work by the rules of probability, though these rules clearly govern our universe. We do something else that usually serves us well but fails in crucial instances: we "match to type". We abstract what we consider the "essence" of an entity and then arrange our judgement by their degree of similarity to this assumed type."**

(Stephen Jay Gould, review of *Streak: Joe Dimaggio and the summer of '41* in the New York Review of Books).

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 classful



Sylvie Drapeau and Denis Roy in *Éclipse*, by Denis Langlois

working in crews of 20 at the university level and having peak experiences.

Then there are those films at the Rendez-vous made by cinéastes 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*; *Kidnappé*; *Lamento pour un homme de lettres*; *Le Grand monde*; *Onzième spéciale*; *Alias Will James*; *A Nice Day in the Country*; *Abijevis*; *Sales Images*; *La Lettre d'amour* and *Les Écarts 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."

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

Abijevis (35mm, color, 29 min, 40 sec), by André Dudemaine 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 on 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. *Abijevis* is intent on being itself, 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.

Dudemaine 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 Crépuscule), 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 Scouine* and an unfinished work, *Lamento*. The subtext 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 '60s. 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 little 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 co-op, 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 Écarts 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.

Eclipse, 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 impersonal venues.

L'ombre de nous (Guylaine 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 in shadowed shapes over a hilly landscape and a shot of a shadow of a baby skirting the frame are ascribing 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. Ungar) 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.

L'étranger/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 weakens a kind of surreal nightmare havoc. Death, 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? thoughts? germs?) All life in his world is surrounded by energetic squibs.

"Before you can be accepted as novice into the Brotherhood of Light, you must first renounce the world and its works. Specifically, the doctrines of the orthodox non-believing fathers: producers, distributors, exhibitors, critics... executives, professional moviemakers, and all those who condemn acts of vision as a 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 Broughton,
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 chauvinism. Women were not "dolls."

Moi, I felt 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, the series was there, because they had made X number of films before. Few films seemed driven by interior forces. It was not a question of having something to say - more often it was finding something or someone to film, setting up the camera and allowing the subject to perform/talk/paint/play. Many documentaries resembled reportage (*Alias Will James* was an exception, not the rule). This is what happens, they said, this is what happened. Reportage is what one sees on TV news - films need to strive for more than that.

There were complaints about restraints in shooting budgets and days; made-for-TV movies were made (five of them) for \$800,000 each on 21-day shooting schedules; this was seen as a limitation. Please? Micheline Lanctôt's *Onzième Spéciale* didn't suffer at all. Good cast, a strong story-line, an excellent performance by Sylvie-Catherine Beaudoin as a woman painter wondering what she's doing, who she is, wandering around, frustrated with her craft; and bothered intensely by an upcoming school reunion - the film touched on a lot of important issues without becoming heavy or losing its way.

Seen and appreciated at the Rendez-vous: *Kidnappé* by Thomas Corriveau, a four-years-in-the-making animated *policier* of eight minutes duration; *Mourir* by François Girard, a 10-minute video blown to 35mm. A precious moment when a father is tying the tie of his

condemned-to-hang son and he verbalizes on the difficulty of tying someone's else's tie; *Sales Images* by Remy Beausoleil, Michel De Gagné and Michel Gélinas, three people who should work together again. A pyrotechnical display of jumped-up hippy-hoppy cinema. At 14 minutes, a tad long but it deserves a distributor and a long life. *Le Grand Monde* by Marcel Simard. Ex-psychiatric patients play themselves, we watch as they struggle for autonomy and wonder how they get through, like us, all that paperwork.

Films made in Quebec seem strongest when they find something from the past to revere or admonish or contemplate. In a period of turmoil and exhilarating change, the past lies still - to be explored. The present is "très buzzy" and the future, well, the future... don't worry, be happy...

DAFFY DUCK SUGGESTION OF THE MONTH:

Take all the \$75 million of subsidies that go to the broadcasters/big guys and divide it up as guaranteed annual income for filmmakers. That's \$33,000 per year to 2,475 filmmakers, which happens to be the exact number projected for the year 2000. That way, rent and food would be looked after and they could "live" (think, write, read) while thinking about what they wanted to say. The other \$75 million to make the films would come from the lottery games. There must be a country in Europe that does that now? Holland? Denmark? Somewhere filmfolk are allowed the status of farmers... ●



Louise Cuierrier as La Scouine in Pierre Jutras' *Lamento pour un homme de lettres*

PHOTO: ALAIN GAUTHIER