

ROLAND BARTHES AND THE NFB CONNECTION

"Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth."

-Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957)

If there are times when structuralism and semiology seem like foreign imports, critical methodologies to which we must adjust and adapt ourselves but which emanate from distant cultures, it comes as a rather pleasant surprise to learn that early on in his illustrious career, Roland Barthes – a major figure in French structuralism and author of *Mythologies*, *Writing Degree Zero*, *S/Z*, *Pleasure of the Text* – made a film for the National Film Board.

Of Sport and Men, an hour-long black-and-white production, was made in 1961 in Montreal. I heard about the film only recently, through a teacher of cultural studies at the University of Toronto, who invited me to view it with his class. He, in turn, had learned of it through colleagues exploring the sociology of sport. I mention these contacts only to illustrate that the film has had a reputation and a viewership among sociological circles, but appears to have escaped notice from film studies practitioners.

The film is quite fascinating on several levels, and it certainly deserves to be rescued from the impending oblivion which may be in store for it, since, according to executive producer Guy Glover, *Of Sport and Men* has been withdrawn from the new NFB catalogue for 1977-78. There is always the hope that a deluge of requests for booking might avert the archival abyss.

The credits on the film itself call *Of Sport and Men* a film "by Roland Barthes". The late Hubert Aquin is named as producer, Guy Glover as executive producer, but no director, writer, or editor credits appear on the film. Robert Russel is given a translator credit, and Al Bachulus listed for music. At the NFB Reference Library, Ms. Todd checked the files and found that there Barthes is listed as writer for the film, but director and editor remain unnamed. To find out the extent of Barthes' involvement in the production and the story behind its making, it seemed worthwhile to contact Guy Glover, who kindly sorted out some of the confusions, shared his recollections about the people involved, and explained the larger context within which *Of Sport and Men* was made.

During the late Fifties, a series called *Comparisons* was initiated at the Board. Made for television-viewing, the series, in its first phase, was "an attempt to popularize certain sociological themes" through what were called prestige productions: high-budget hour-long films involving well-known experts as commentators. Between 1959 and 1961, four such films were made: *Four Families* (1959), *Four Religions* (1960), *Four Teachers* (1961), and *Courtship* (1961). Each production involved on-location shooting in four different countries; a famous expert in the relevant field scripted the commentary and appeared on-camera for studio sequences which bridged the location footage. For each film there was a team of at least five directors and crews, with Ian MacNeill responsible for all the studio shooting, and a different director sent to each of the four countries being compared. Thus, for example, *Four Families* explored the daily living habits of one family in Japan, another in India, one in France and one in Canada, with Margaret Mead providing the commentary in the studio.

Each of these four films was first released for television as an English production, and only a year or so later was there a French version made. Hubert Aquin was involved in the pre-

paration of the French versions. After 1961, the *Comparisons* series went into its second phase, during which the hour-long format was abandoned and fifteen half-hour films were produced, also for television. In between these two phases came *Of Sport and Men* – given the *Comparisons* logo, but quite unlike its predecessors in the series in conception, production and style.

According to Glover, after the four "prestige productions" had been completed, Hubert Aquin proposed his idea for *Of Sport and Men*, an hour-long film comparing a national sport in each of several countries. There was no more money for another high-budget film of this length, but it was not Aquin's intention to do any of the expensive location-shooting which had characterized the other films. Instead, he argued that the film he envisioned could be made quite inexpensively by purchasing stock library footage from a variety of sources like the BBC and US newsreel companies and by using material from the NFB's own library. Glover recalls him saying, "You could shoot for a year and not have a better selection of material." As well, Aquin's conception of the film did not necessitate studio sequences, but he did most definitely want the expert he had in mind. Roland Barthes, involved in the production.

Glover remembers that Aquin, former film critic for *L'Authorité*, CKAC and producer for Radio-Canada, was "a devoted follower of the work of Roland Barthes", whose essays on culture were being discussed enthusiastically in Quebec's intellectual circles at the time. Once the idea for *Of Sport and Men* was approved, library footage of famous sporting events was purchased from several countries and a special editor, Robert Russell, was brought in to work with Aquin. "They were very excited about the film, and so saturated with Roland Barthes' approach to analyzing culture and sport that they may have constructed the film according to it."

Barthes was brought over from Paris for a week to write the commentary. He was presented with a cutting copy of the film, a shot list

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with timings for each sequence, and given space at the Board for multiple viewings at an editing bench. Aquin, Russell and Barthes worked closely together for the week, preparing two versions of the commentary so that an English and a French version could be released for television simultaneously, a departure from the usual procedure in the series. Robert Russell translated from Barthes' French, a task which Glover recognized as being "almost impossible because of his richly nuanced style." Accordingly, "the two commentaries are really quite different," although **Le sport et les hommes** and **Of Sport and men** apparently coincide visually in every detail.

When asked whether Barthes involved himself in other productions being made at the Board during his stay, Glover explained that Barthes was quite interested in the Quebec filmmakers and probably spent most of his off-hours in their company. Many of them were quite familiar with and interested in Barthes' critical work, (*Le Degré Zéro de l'Écriture* was published in 1953, and *Mythologies* in 1957): "certainly Jutra knew Barthes' writings, and Barthes knew of Jutra who had made a film (*Anna la bonne*, 1959) in Paris with Truffaut."

Within the credits for **La lutte**, made in 1961 by Jutra, Michel Brault, Claude Fournier and Marcel Carrière, there is a printed "homage" to Roland Barthes. This, plus the coincidence of the similar production date for **Of Sport and Men** and **La lutte**, warranted a phone-call to Jutra, who confirmed that "Barthes happened to be passing through Montreal during the time **La lutte** was being discussed, and since wrestling very much interested him as a sport, he was invited to come along during the filming." **La lutte** was shot "without a script or anything" in one evening, with "ten cameras and eight Nagras" – a kind of spontaneous mad-cap event in which "Barthes was just there, hanging around". The film "was a hit in France among the intellectual circles," and the homage was included in the credits "because he and all of us so enjoyed the evening". Although Jutra did not imply that Barthes was any more than a guest on the shooting of **La lutte**, it would certainly be interesting to think about the film in terms of his well-known analysis, "The World of Wrestling" published in *Mythologies*.

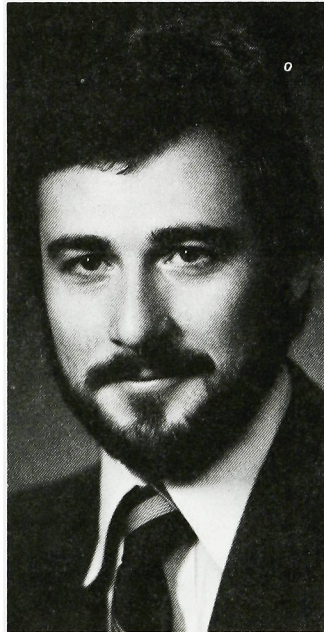
The commentary for **Of Sport and Men** is a continuation of the kind of semiological investigation into cultural conventions evident in *Mythologies*. Within the *Comparisons* series, the film is an anomaly, indeed, a return to an honorable tradition of filmmaking at the Board – the compilation film. While ostensibly a vehicle for Barthes' perceptive analysis of five different national sports – bullfighting, Formula car-racing, the Tour de France bicycling event, hockey, and soccer (or "English football" as it is called in the film) – there is also an underlying suggestion of the kind of interrogation of the image itself for which semiology in its couplings with film theory has proved so useful.

Each of the five sections is strikingly different in editing pace, selection of consistent camera style to characterize and shape the material of a section, music, extent and use of cutaways to develop involvement between spectator and sport, the amount of commentary in proportion to use of wild-track sound, length, etc. If, as Guy Glover claims, Barthes was presented with a *fait accompli* and was

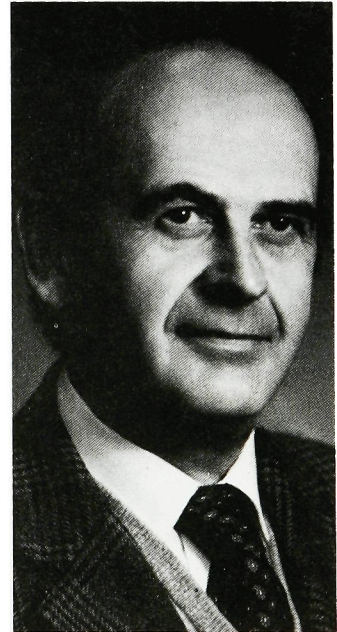
not at liberty to alter or make suggestions about the order of edited shots or their lengths, then seemingly the structure of the edited images would impose its own limitations and propose its own conventions for Barthes' analysis. A careful exploration of **Of Sport and Men** as an editing exercise, "a film made totally in the cutting-room", might reveal the visual structure Barthes had to work with – the filmic complications which placed him at one remove from sport as spectacle as the subject of analysis, and confronted him with sport as film-ed spectacle instead.

Glover describes **Of Sport and Men** as "a labor of love" for its small team of filmmakers. If rather unlike any of the other *Comparisons* films in the series, at least in terms of budget and production style, it distinguishes itself by its grounding in a theoretical base by which such comparisons can be made. It is to be hoped that there will be an increasing audience for **Le sport et les hommes** and **Of Sport and Men** in Canada, the source of Roland Barthes' NFB connection. □

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