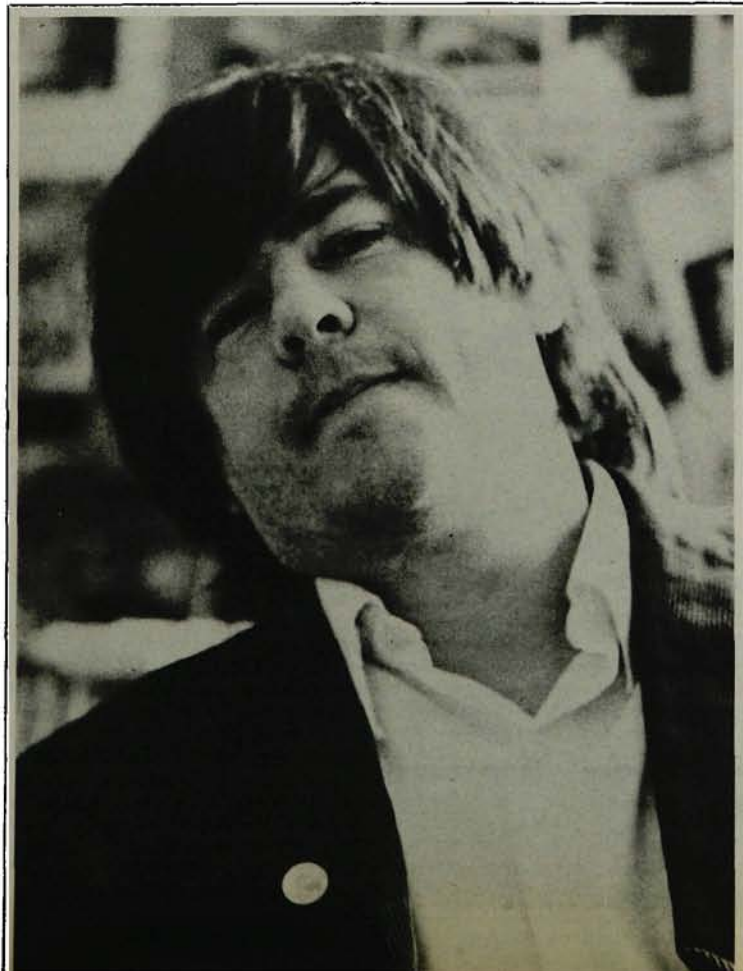


photos: Lois Siegel



The director's fear of the blank screen

by Michael Dorland

"On est toujours son seul et propre référent" - Forcier

André Forcier, 35 and a filmmaker, stared morosely at the bottle of Brador before him. That morning he'd woken up feeling down. Now the down sat perched upon his shoulder like a pet monkey, nibbling at his mind. Forcier would have liked to drink himself into the comfortable stupor where existential concerns no longer obtrude. Instead, he had to do an interview, yet another interview, and force himself to answer all those stupid questions, that cannot be answered, like "Why do you make films?" and "How do you situate yourself vis-à-vis Québécois filmmaking?"

"*Quel con!*"¹ Forcier muttered, including himself in the expletive as well as the interviewer who would assail him with impossible questions.

Journalists, a collection of *cons*: not only impertinent but ignorant to boot. One, on television, after a long exposé on laxatives, had called Forcier 'Mr. Fortier,' then had referred to Frank, one of the central characters in Forcier's fourth feature *Au clair de la lune*, as 'Franck.'

Another, in print this time, had gone on about Forcier's "instability" or some such off-the-rack psychoanalytic key as the explanation of Forcier and his films.

"How can you explain life?" Forcier wondered. "Short of being *con*, you don't sit down before a blank piece of paper or an empty screen and announce that you wish to demonstrate something. Me, I don't want to explain anything. It's all just bullshit."

Being proud, Forcier felt full of discrimination. Journalists were neither proud nor discriminating, so you could tell them anything. That was what made dealing with them such a mixture of pleasure and revulsion - pleasure at the enormity of one's lies, followed by revulsion before one's own *connerie*.

Forcier sipped his beer and rehearsed. "These days I'm studied in colleges. Marc-André Forcier, born in '47 of a policeman father and a mother who was an operator for Bell Telephone. It was a Saturday during a heat-wave. Baptised the next day at St-Edouard Church. At the age of one I fell in my walker down two flights of stairs. The next day I was taken to the doctor for an examination. They found nothing wrong apparently."

"It was just after the war. I have memories of myself at six months, at eight months, at a year-and-a-half. Nobody believes me. I can remember parades - in Montreal after the war there were a slew of marching bands. I remember the Queen's visit in 1952, on St-Denis Street. I remember... getting plastered in Plattsburgh. I was born *con*, I'll die *con*."

Forcier impatiently brushed the hair out of his eyes, and looked at the time.

"There's no interview here," he thought, "because the basis of it all is whimsy. Why does one make films? To be loved? Because we hate ourselves? All that is just stupidity. There is nothing fundamental in the development of a work of art. There is nothing that is being shown. All these pretensions at explanation are just things that are said afterwards."

Forcier stared out the window. What was he doing sitting by a window, with the sun streaming in? Forcier hated the light. He'd always preferred the gloom and the rain. When he was four, he'd lie to his mother just to be able to stay longer outside in the rain walking alone around the block, around and around. That was why he invented the character of Frank, an Albino, a person with a horror of light. Was that really why? Or was it because he'd liked what Cioran the philosopher had written about the fear of light in his *Précis de décomposition*? Forcier didn't know: he didn't know anything, didn't know why he was here, didn't know why he'd agreed to this interview.

"It's all whim. All that interests me, everything I live, are emotions. I wanted to start from scratch on a blank screen. Yeah, that's it: I tell myself I'm mentally ill. I'm not normal. I was six years old and they were telling me I wasn't normal. I'm sick. And I want to express myself. And I say there's nothing to say."

Obsessions. Forcier obsessively emptied his beer and obsessively ordered another and continued to remember.

"I was fascinated by the idea of someone allergic to the light. And I had another character who kept going through my mind - someone with arthritis, with fingers so swollen they could no longer fit into a bowling-ball. I wanted to do something in the tone of *commedia dell'arte*, a comical film where the situations would turn on emotions. I didn't want the characters to be cynical.

"I must have begun writing *Au clair de la lune* sometime in '77. I took my time with it. Subsequently, I attended an actors' workshop in Ottawa - there was Guy L'Écuyer and Michel Côté, then appearing in a play in Ottawa. With them it really exploded."

Forcier hesitated. The sun was gone; slowly the nightmare memories advanced upon him, and the sinking realization that he would have to talk about them during the interview. Later, Forcier forced his mind to stick to the chronology.

"*Au clair de la lune* is full of the generosity of its actors. It's an immense conspiracy of complicity. If I've worked largely with the same people, it's because I haven't made very many films. To work with someone like L'Écuyer is a privilege. He's an actor of extraordinary diversity: the owner of a bar-salon (*Bar Salon*), a homosexual chef (*L'eau chaude l'eau frette*), or a human billboard (*Au clair de la lune*). I steal his richness. I'm just a thief."

Forcier stared morosely at his beer, then he plunged into the memories of that terrible winter of '79-'80.

"It's awful to talk about the production of a film; it only makes the film that much more vulnerable. The shoot was a nightmare. It was 40 below zero, and we were cold. One after the other the principal players fell ill. There was no room in which to manoeuvre. We had to pay the technicians nonetheless; they were under contract. I work from a very tight script. I don't shoot like a master - I shoot in one shot. So even if one lead player was ill, I could shoot the other.

"As far as I knew, we had the money for principal photography and for post-production. With that money we shot the film, but there was nothing left for post-production. We had a little money left, \$2,000, but not enough to complete the film.

"The producers pretty rapidly came up with a financing solution, but then there was a lobby against us. There

were all kinds of rumors going around: that we were too young, and it was time we were taught a lesson. There were rumors that we'd run up debts, that it was a bad production, that we weren't serious people.

"*Bar Salon* was shot for \$58,000 - under budget; *Nightcap* - under budget, the only one of that NFB series; *L'eau chaude l'eau frette*, budgeted at \$373,000 came in at \$368,000 - under budget; *Le retour de l'immaculée Conception* and *Chroniques labradoriennes* I paid for out of my own pocket; *Au clair de la lune* - \$912,000: under budget.

"The wait lasted three years - three years during which it was impossible to do anything. I was able to assemble the film but it was unfinished - there were none of the special effects. In the meantime I got hired on as a director at the National Film Board. I'm very proud to be with the National Film Board of Canada - it's a haven of freedom.

"I've tried to forget all that; I've forgotten the time it took; I haven't counted the days. I suffered. *Au clair de la lune* is a film that I vomit forth. It was a nightmare.

"I didn't want to go back to it. I didn't want to know anything about that film. Bernard Lalonde, one of my producers, was tremendously supportive. When I did get back to it, I'd almost lost all contact with the film. I saw it as a challenge: after all that had happened, was it still possible to have fun with this film? It still seemed to contain emotions, ideas that were worth putting across, there was still something to be done with that film. I decided to orient it in the direction of its emotions. I decided to fuck the chronology. I took the idea of the voice-over from another film I'll never shoot. I drew on elements from that film to tell the story of this one. *Au clair de la lune* is completely different

from the film I wanted to make.

"I wanted to make a film that escaped time. I didn't want to situate the film in 'Quebecitude' or Canadianity - it was as if I'd intuited the worst blows. I wanted the film not to be framed by reality. I wanted the costumes to be beyond time, beyond fashion. And Montreal not to be that of '69 any more than that of '80. I wanted the film outside of time - to protect it from something I feared, as though I was expecting a catastrophe.

"So I wanted a film shot entirely in artificial decors, in which each natural element of the décor would be transformed into artifice: that's why I used colored lighting, that's why the fake snowstorm, that's why the roman candles in the wheel-rims, that's why the aurora borealis. But these aren't 'effects', they're integral."

Forcier laughed bitterly. "So we played the lighting card, and we played the color card, we played all the cards. Out of whimsy. It's all vanity. Why make films? For nothing. I don't know why I make films.

"Yes, I know. I learned to make films at school. I was good at it. At the Longueuil classical college, there was an experimental course on filmmaking. Me, I was always last in my class in method and I wasn't intelligent enough to learn Greek. Just as stupid as always. They stuck me in a plastic arts and cinema major, and I showed talent at it; I learned how to make a script really tight; I caught on right away; I picked up the language of film like that. And as I was learning that, I started to write about films since they made me write film reviews. So I learned to write. And I was very good in French and film. You make films because you were good at it in school. It's stupid, but that's how it is.

"So I've made this film, and I'm certain that it works, that it'll touch people. But

what kind of bargaining power does that give me? You English say, 'You're only as good as your last film.' This morning I don't want to continue.

"I didn't want any of this. I wanted the film to come out in a small theatre; they said it could take a large theatre. They put me before a *fait accompli*. So now I give interviews, I go on TV.

"As for where it leaves me, it leaves me in the middle-income bracket of Film Board directors, earning just under \$36,000 a year. Roughly what a first-class police officer gets after four years. But that's important. Before, I didn't have credit cards. Now I've got a whole handful and Mastercard has called wanting to boost my credit limit."

Forcier ordered another beer, slyly pleased with himself.

"There is in *Au clair de la lune* a certain lightness of tone that is taken for the film's thesis when it isn't. There is the tone of the film and there is its content; and the tone irritates because it is contradictory to the content. It's a light film; you laugh a lot. The laughter is light, or rather it lightens, but is not itself light. It's a hypocritical film because the tone does not fit with the content. It's a snide film; but then being is snide.

"There is cynicism in the special effects; that I admit. I don't know if you'd call it a wink, I hope so. But I think the courage of the characters surpasses all that. To me it's a film about courageous people. I like the courage of Bert's comeback; I like the courage of Léopoldine Dieumegarde who is a veritable little Mother Courage. I like Frank's cowardliness - it takes guts to live like a coward in a welfare society. I think they're all courageous.

"But then I'm always the first spectator of my films. How can one be in the heads of others? One is always alone and one's own reference point. The Other is an imaginary referent. The fact of being one and of not being born two is the fact of solitude. It's the fact of *Au clair de la lune*, which is the symbiosis of solitude, the osmosis of solitude. And the cynicism of the film is the hallucination brought about by hope - that provokes the image of the difference of the Other. *Au clair de la lune* is about two separate beings: an intellectual (Frank) and a *naïf* (Bert). I am the Albino. I would rather have been Bert. I would have liked to be able to believe.

"I would have rather not been an artist, I would have rather lacked in nothing. I would like to fade out when I come home in the evening and not drag my job around in my head 24 hours a day. I would have liked to have a stamp collection and been happy collecting stamps. I would have liked to be a bee-keeper, a prime-minister, an aviator, a waiter in a tavern with lots of tips. I would have liked to admire... Instead I'm a sick individual who makes films just to get it on with women. There's only Bergman who doesn't make films to get it on with women. He's a sincere human being. *Quel con!*"

Forcier looked up from his reverie to see the interviewer heading towards him, tape-recorder slung over his shoulder, eyes shifting with treachery.

Oh merde, Forcier thought, now it would begin...

"Are you André Fortier, the filmmaker?"

● "It was 40 below, and we were cold; *Au clair de la lune* is a film I vomit forth."



1/ The word "con" literally signifies the visible portion of the female sex organs. However, to the Cartesian mind, its meaning extends to encompass a general condemnation of the fleshly. To be "con", finally, is to be human. Thus the wide usage of the word as a universal expression of contempt.

André Forcier's

Au Clair de la lune

"Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays c'est l'hiver," sings Gilles Vigneault in a famous song. Since Voltaire's curt dismissal of Canada as some arpent of snow, winter has been this country's curse just as it has been its fate. Not surprisingly it is a Québécois, André Forcier, who has made the definitive film about our country, winter.

In *Bar Salon* (1975), Forcier's second feature film, winter was in appropriately desolate shades of grey and dirty white, the mud-caked desperation of filthy Februaries, bleak and relentless, an infinity of grey tomorrows in which twice-marginalized human beings (marginalized first by nature then by the economy) still managed to sparkle in the incandescence of their futility.

Au clair de la lune returns to winter but now, in 35mm colour, it is winter as magic, as a carnival of swirling cotton puffs, the candy-cotton stuff of dreams in the silences of eternity. This is winter as a sacred space, a mantle for the creation of life-myths in technicolor.

Here in the quiet of the snow-bound back alleys of Montreal, *Au clair de la lune* tells the story of the friendship of two men who live inside the frozen hulk of a green 1971 Chev in a parking lot behind the Moonshine Bowling alley.

François "Frank" (Michel Côté) is an Albino from the mythic land of Albinie. Albert "Bert" Bolduc (Guy L'Écuyer) is a former bowling champion, reduced by arthritis to a human billboard for the Moonshine. Chased through the alleys by the Dragons, the local authority figures who drive their souped-up cars on tireless rims as sparks stream forth like roman candles, Bert finds Frank seemingly frozen to death and brings him back to life.

"Au clair de la lune" is also a French children's song, the second and third lines of which go: "Prêtes-moi ta plume pour écrire un mot, ma chandelle est morte, je n'ai plus de feu" (Lend me your pen so that I can write, my candle has died and I'm out of fire). The film *Au clair de la lune*, then, would seem to be about the role of art in the service of the Resurrection.

In this space between life and death, Forcier deploys the characters that inhabit his obsessions. Under the winking lights of the nighttime neons of the urban *néant*, the shuffling shadows of the lumpen proletariat dissolve to take on human form: Ti-Kid Radio (Gaston Lepage) in his fringed leather jacket delivering smoked-meat sandwiches on his bike for the Rainbow Sweets restaurant, riding on tireless rims and talking only in English CB dialect as he dreams of becoming a Dragon; Léopoldine Dieumegarde (Lucie Miville), another of Forcier's precocious girl-women, as The Maniac who goes around puncturing car tires in a desperate, loving bid to save her father's recycled-tire business from bankruptcy; or Alfred, custodian of the Moonshine, who shares his Valium with Ti-Beu, his dog and companion in senility.

It is a world seen through the frozen bottom of an empty bottle of Benylin cough syrup, the local champagne. If it is a world where all that glitters is not gold, at least the pile of quarters that Franks earns running a tire-protection

racket do gleam, as do the characters' eyes when they light up with manic inspiration.

Here - even here - hope springs eternal and fantasies have their own necessity as that cynical myth-maker Frank knows as he schemes to cure Bert's arthritis and so allow him to make a comeback at the Moonshine tournament.

Au clair de la lune is an ascension - from the lower depths to those peaks of experience from where, in the words of Frank's wonderfully cynical voice-over, "at last you can savor the miracle of life" and recall "the follies of our winters." Frank 'cures' Bert's arthritis and Bert makes a comeback beyond his wildest dreams. But, as Frank narrates, "the last folly is always the one you must expiate."

After the initial violence of the shock of mortality, the fall back into the depths is as gentle as the flutter of the surrounding snow. All of a sudden Bert's hair is as white as Frank's who had upon this day promised to take Bert to Albinie.

Huddled in their car as the great cold sets in, at last out of fire except for one final bottle of tournament champagne, the two friends, now purified as Albert and François, prepare to discover that Albinie is Death. As the Moonshine parking lot echoes with their hilarity at the thought they will be "congealed like Walt Disney", the snow falls softly covering the roof of the green Chev. *Hiberna vincit omnia*.

To die congealed is to die in a state of suspended animation. This posits resurrection - but only as in the case of Disney, whose body was cryonized, as a technological intervention. When Frank says, "At least the worms won't eat us until summer," this denotes the residue of a belief in resurrection as myth ("summer") and as a process of natural teleology (worms) that is at the same time implicitly denied by the locus of death (inside a car, moveable technology). For without resurrection, life is simply a story of progressive putrefaction.

Already under the weight of winter, life is stunted, frozen and immobilized; and life myths are not certainties, merely delusions. Against winter's frozen eter-

nity, life becomes a corruption. Behind the magical illusions of *Au clair de la lune* a soundless scream points to the horrors of impossible existence.

In Forcier's horror-filled vision these diminished human beings shit and piss, bleed and pustulate. They are not the living dead but, worse, the rotting living, tumbling towards a meaningless death buoyed upon the froth of their illusions. Forcier (who always slips himself into his films as either retarded, mute or an idiot), because he cannot bear to articulate the truth, contents himself with dumb-struck descriptions of the opium of the people that are the people themselves.

Yet in the face of the anti-humanism of winter, Forcier, much like the society the inhabits, can only reach for another anti-humanism, that of technology. Perhaps in (literally) animating the depths of the delusions of his characters, it was his way of drawing attention to them. Instead, the animation technology only produces their gross manipulation. In this sense, *Au clair de la lune* is Forcier's most cynical film: for nothing, not even art, can save these wretched creatures. And the price we pay for winter (for living in the techno-state) is an eternal condemnation to colorful futility.

While *Au clair de la lune* is manifestly Forcier's vision, many people helped realize it. Voltaire, of course, and E.M. Cioran, the Roumanian Nietzsche, get screen credits for providing philosophical inspiration. The screenplay is shared between producers Louis Laverdière and Bernard Lalonde, L'Écuyer, Forcier, Côté, long-time collaborator Jacques Marcotte and Forcier's neighbor, filmmaker Michel Pratt. Other veterans of the Forcier *équipe* include regular DOP François Gill who is also the editor of the film. *Au clair de la lune* was co-produced with the National Film Board who lent the unmistakable signature of Sidney Goldsmith for the special animation effects and made it possible for *Au clair* to be properly completed. In Bert, Guy L'Écuyer has delivered a diamond-hard performance of brilliant bathos and Michel Côté's Frank has all the sorrow of stardust. Joël

Bienvenue's mocking musical score adds just the right touch of persiflage. *Au clair de la lune* is a film of immense sadness. For in the absence of the Resurrection is the Life: *this* life, such as it is.

Appropriately then, *Au clair de la lune* was plagued with completion problems, yet another example of the kinds of crucifixions that chronically keep Canadian art from Canadians. Along the lines of the same principle, it is equally unlikely that *Au clair de la lune* will receive the wide distribution it deserves outside Quebec. In Quebec, however, thanks to the heroic efforts of the independent distributor Cinéma Libre, of which Forcier is one of the co-founders, the film will get what he calls a "normal" distribution.

In a sense the timing is perfect. In *Au clair de la lune*, this *Wunderkind* of Quebec cinema (who began making films at 19) has effected a fascinating synthesis of his two earlier features, *Bar Salon* and *L'eau chaude l'eau frette* (1976). If the former film was bleak to the point of despair (though balanced against the hard pretension of its realism) the latter was too much of a sitcom, sacrificing its cutting edge for the respite of a mid-summer's eve. Not for nothing was *L'eau chaude* acclaimed in Italy where its spirit was recognized as Mediterranean. But this says more about the climactic schizophrenia of Canada where summer is the illusion and winter the reality.

Au clair de la lune confirms Forcier - now 35 - in his true stature as the bard of these winters of our discontent. Yet though rooted in this quintessentially Canadian context, *Au clair de la lune* also transcends it to achieve a superior universality through its concentration on what Hannah Arendt, in a comment on Chaplin, called "the entrancing charm of the little people."

Forcier, as reclusive as Howard Hughes, had skipped town for the press screening of the film over which he has labored since 1979. He left in his wake one sentence, like the tail of a comet: "I sought in the time of a life a sort of space that would contain the smallness of the century." He did not need to add that that space could only be a coffin; appropriately a North American car.

Michael Dorland ●

AU CLAIR DE LA LUNE d. André Forcier
 exec. p. Bernard Lalonde, Louis Laverdière p. dir.
 Laverdière, Marthe Pelletier p. co-ord. Edouard
 Davidovici p. asst. René Deniger, Roland Carrier,
 Jean-Paul Lebourhys, Michel Toutan, Fabrice Gabil-
 land loc. man. Suzanne Girard, Michel Siry sc.
 Forcier, Jacques Marcotte, Michel Pratt, Guy L'Écuyer,
 Michel Côté, Bernard Lalonde asst. sc. Michele
 Leduc, Marthe Pelletier a.d. Pierre Gendron, Marie-
 André Brouillard art d. Gilles Aird tech. dir. Forcier,
 François Gill d.o.p. François Gill, André Gagnon
 asst. cam. Michel Caron, Daniel Vincelette key
 grip Marc de Ernsted grip Jean-Maurice de Ernsted
 gaffer Richer Francoeur, head: Jean Courteau,
 Denis Menard, Jacques Girard sd. ed. Mathieu
 Decary sd. asst. Alain Corneau, Marcel Fraser
 props Patrice Benge, Louis Craig sp. efx. Louis
 Laverdière, Sidney Goldsmith cost. des. François
 Laplante ward. Diane Paquet make-up Mickie
 Hamilton set des. Gilles Aird neg. cut. Dagmar
 Gueissaz stunt dir. Marcel Fournier sd. efx. Ken
 Page opt. efx. sup. Louis Laverdière opt. efx.
 prep. Walter Howard, Susan Gourley mixer Jean-
 Pierre Joutel, Adrian Groll music comp. Joël Bien-
 venue mus. sup. Catherine Gadouas mus. rec.
 Louis Hone, Joël Bienvenue lab. Bellevue-Pathé,
 NFB color comp. Gundrun Kanz, André Gagnon
 cast. cons. Lise Abastados unit pub. Marie Decary
 dist. (word-wide) Cinema Libre, 35mm color,
 running time: 90 min. p.c. Les Productions Albinie
 lp. Guy L'Écuyer, Michel Côté, Lucie Miville, Robert
 Gravel, Michel Gagnon, Gaston Lepage, J.-Leo
 Gagnon, Ti-beu, Elise Varo, Louise Gagnon, Pierre
 Girard, Marcel Fournier, Gilles Lafleur, Yvon Le-
 compte, Charlie Beauchamp, Stéphane L'Écuyer,
 Dino des Laurentides, Gros-Louis.

