

QUÉBEC CINÉMA:



The evolution of Quebec's cinematic production was one of the featured subjects at the third annual Workshop on Quebec Studies held at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières in November. Sponsored jointly by that university, and the Ontario and Quebec governments through their permanent commission for cooperation, the gathering brought together some 30 professors from Ontario universities who teach courses dealing with various aspects of Quebec society and culture.

This year's topic was "l'expression actuelle du québécois dans le cinéma, dans le théâtre et dans les beaux arts" — which could be translated as "the contemporary expression of what is distinctly 'Québécois' in film, theatre and fine art." The session on cinema was opened by a lecture given by Jean-Pierre Tadros, editor of *Cinéma-Québec* and film reviewer for the Montreal daily, *Le Jour*. It was followed by a lively workshop discussion in which Tadros was joined by Robert Gurik, the well-known Quebec playwright who had been guest speaker on the subject of theatre, and recently completed the scenario for a new Jean-Claude Labrecque film on the Duplessis years.

Tadros said that five or ten years ago it was easier to answer the question, "Is there a 'cinéma québécois'?" Then the reply was clearly affirmative. Today there is a progressive commercialisation of French-language films with the desired aim of reaching a so-called international audience. This, he said, has led to a big push in the direction of (pseudo-) erotic and comedy films.

Quebec's cinema began just after the Second World War and in its first ten years, the watchword was melodrama, Tadros said. "Pre-historic" films, such as *La Petite Aurore, l'enfant martyr* (Aurora, the child martyr), or *Un Homme et son péché* (A Man and his sin), had a certain commercial success because of the difficulty of getting well-made French films in the war's aftermath. An added factor was the exploitation of popular stars of radio soap-operas whom the public was anxious to see "in the flesh" on the screen.

A second commercial wave began in 1969, following the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. In this recent wave, television personalities became featured as film stars, often in movies that were supposedly erotic and allegedly aimed to break down the traditional Quebec taboos about sex, but in fact were shallow in content. The prototype for this kind of film was Denis Héroux' *Valérie*.

The films that truly express what is most distinctly "Québécois", according to Tadros, are not necessarily those that are launched with the biggest fanfare of publicity. They are often seen by smaller numbers of movie-goers, and are only partially fiction films, with strong documentary and didactic components. These films are, to a greater or lesser extent, films of social criticism. Even though their audiences are not large, their number, in terms of production, outweighs that of commercial films.

The non-commercial trend had its beginnings in the National Film Board about ten years ago, according to Tadros. Substantial budgets were available as well as the spur of making Canada known to its own inhabitants and abroad. The Francophone film-makers at the NFB rejected a narrowly touristic aim for their films and sought rather to create an authentic, autonomous cinema. Early examples were Gilles Carle's *La Vie Heureuse de Léopold Z* (The Merry World of L.Z.) and Gilles Groulx' *Le Chat dans le sac* (Cat in the Bag). Both these films were products of the separate French-language section of the N.F.B., which was created in 1958. There, the "cinéma direct" approach of the Quebec filmmakers corresponded to the "camera eye" orientation of their English-speaking colleagues. "Cinéma direct" was pioneered by Gilles Groulx in his short, *Les Raquetteurs* (The Snowshoers), produced in the same year as the French section was launched. It evolved into the participatory full-length documentary, especially in the work of Pierre Perrault — *Pour la suite du monde* (For those who come after us), the first of the Ile aux Coudres trilogy, and later *L'Acadie! L'Acadie!*

The Quebec directors set out to give cinematic expression to the reality that was theirs, and to make an inventory of the Quebec patrimony, thus creating an important tradition. Out of the N.F.B. came a whole network of producers who are very active today in Quebec cinema. Tadros pointed to Michel Brault's *Les Ordres* (The Orders) as an example of the strong influence of "cinéma direct" and the documentary tradition of current production.

Jean-Pierre Tadros then went on to examine some of the economic and administrative problems facing Quebec's cinema. The state, he said, is the main provider of the financial aid needed by the costly movie industry. Speaking a few weeks before the occupation by prominent Quebec directors of the province's censorship offices, Tadros echoed the criticism that in spite of

Premier Bourassa's slogan of "cultural sovereignty", Quebec has reneged on repeated promises to introduce fundamental legislation to promote its French-language film production and distribution. This has led filmmakers to turn reluctantly to Federal agencies for funds, while at the same time being apprehensive of encroachments by Ottawa into the jealously guarded cultural domain.

While the C.F.D.C. ostensibly avoids censorship, said Tadros, it does influence the kinds of films that are eventually made in several ways: 1) it requires the film-maker to submit a scenario, something that goes counter to the approach of many of the French-language directors brought up on "cinéma direct"; 2) films aided by the C.F.D.C. must show proof of commercial success. This latter requirement, said Tadros, tends to favour the promotion of pseudo-erotic films because of alleged public demand, as well as the mixture of comedy and "eroticism" seen in such films as Claude Fournier's *Deux femmes en or* (Two Golden Women).

Parallel with the commercial trend there is the "cinéma d'auteur" or personal cinematic vision in the work of directors like Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Claude Jutra and Gilles Carle as well as the incisive films of Denys Arcand. Carle, according to Tadros, has achieved films of varying degrees of success which are, to a certain extent, halfway between the "film d'auteur" and the commercial film, because of his stress on voluptuous stars like Carole Laure. In this, he has met the demand of movie-house owners who require easily identifiable performers to get Quebec films shown.

A Quebec film with a budget of \$300,000 cannot become a success unless it reaches large audiences abroad as well as at home, said Tadros. This has led some film-makers to aim for the French market, where they must compete with local as well as American films. Another problem has been that of the use of Quebec dialect or highly-anglicized "joual" in recent films, some of which have been subtitled in France.

Tadros pointed to Jutra's *Kamouraska* as a film that has so far failed in its attempt to reach an international audience. He claimed that the original scenario was somewhat emasculated (he didn't give particulars) in order to succeed in the wider market, with the result that the end product was amorphous. Jutra did not have the funds to make of *Kamouraska* the historical reconstruction that it should have been, said Tadros. At the 1973 Cannes festival *Kamouraska* was far from being acclaimed and to date it has not been released in movie-houses in France, although it may be seen there soon on television. The Franco-Quebec production, *Je t'aime* (I Love You), starring French actress Jeanne Moreau, flopped similarly, according to Tadros.

In fact, said the critic, those films which have been most deeply rooted in Quebec reality have had considerable success in France and elsewhere. In this category he placed Denys Arcand's *Réjeanne Padovani* and some of Gilles Carle's films, "whatever one might think of aspects of their quality." In *Padovani*, Arcand consciously set a slow pace in sharp distinction with the typical Hollywood formula.

Turning to concrete elements that typify a distinctly "Québécois" film, Tadros said that a key characteristic was the marginality of the hero, both in fiction and documentary films. This trend probably began with Gilles Groulx's *Le Chat dans le sac* (Cat in the Bag, 1964), in which Claude, the hero, says: "I'm French-Canadian, therefore I'm in search of myself." There is also a desire for self-affirmation through one's originality and uniqueness, as seen in the "family album" of Pierre

Perrault's films. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre tried to sound his people's history through *Les Maudits Sauvages* (Damned Savages). Gilles Carle is conscious of the tough and cruel North American reality. In *La Mort d'un bûcheron* (Death of a Lumberjack), he has tried to recreate certain Quebec archetypes in a modern setting. The priest, a frequent character in early films, has virtually disappeared. On the other hand, the stripper or go-go dancer is strongly in evidence (*La Tendresse ordinaire*, *La Maudite Galette*, *Le Temps d'une chasse*, *Les Maudits Sauvages*, *La Mort d'un bûcheron*, *Gina*) as an ironic symbol of sexual "liberation". Women are central to Carle's films and to Clément Perron's *Taureau* (The Bull). As in much of French-Canadian literature, the father is altogether absent or is a degenerate or vile character. The typical character is a loser, as in Jacques Leduc's *On est loin du soleil* (We're far from the sun.) Death dominates this latter film, which has unbearably drawn-out sequences. At the antipodes of this film is Pierre Harel's *Bulldozer*, equally typical of a certain reality, and laying bare the most decrepit aspects of contemporary Quebec in an explosion of language. There are also films by young directors like Jean-Guy Noël in which they have not yet found a cinematic language to express themselves, perhaps reflecting an existential difficulty.

Jean-Claude Lord's *Bingo* was characterized by Tadros as the possible prototype of the future commercial cinema of Quebec. Aiming at a broad audience, this film is a sort of collage of bits and pieces of Quebec's social reality which remains at a superficial level. Shifting constantly from one scene to another, the film does not help the viewer deepen his understanding of trade union and political problems in Quebec, including the terrorist phenomenon. Its counterpart is *Les Ordres*, with its documentary style and language, its slow pace, discretion and subdued and internalized violence, which Tadros holds to be typically "Québécois".

In the discussion that followed Jean-Pierre Tadros's lecture, some time was spent analyzing what the critic called "the confused language" of some Quebec films, found even in the highly successful *Mon Oncle Antoine*, which Tadros said did not succeed fully in intertwining the psychological and socio-political plots. In this regard, Tadros cited Gilles Carle, who has said that it is much more difficult to produce a worthwhile film with a simple plot than a so-called avant-garde film. Professor Pierre Savard, director of Ottawa University's Centre for the Study of French-Canadian Civilization offered the hypothesis that the confused "language" of a number of films may be the result of the humble origins and lack of higher education of some directors, in contrast with the more "rational" discourse of some Quebec writers with a classical education. Robert Gurik suggested that some confusion may be attributable to the fact that a number of directors were formerly cameramen, and were sharply marked by that distinct but limiting function. Gurik also said that the slow tempo of many Quebec films may flow from the vast space of the province with its isolated human communities and long winter, which tend to stamp human movements in a unique way. Tadros replied, more prosaically, that the reason is often technical, citing the low budget of *La Maudite Galette* as the cause of the profusion of long fixed sequences.

What emerged finally from the lecture and discussion was that Quebec's cinema, in spite of acute problems, is in a state of effervescence and passionate debate. The questions being grappled with are surely of interest not only to those directly involved but all Canadians concerned with cultural survival. □