

maurice bulbulian

a camera and a purpose

by René Balcer

By putting a human face on the issues of poverty in Little Burgundy, Quebec and of capitalist oppression in the mines of Chile, Maurice Bulbulian strives towards a "democracy of communications". He documents a gestalt of art and life where a film's subjects, as well as its filmmaker and audience, learn from the cooperative process.



A meeting at the NFB from *La P'tite Bourgogne*: Bulbulian with camera

"It's not encouraging to tell a story when there's no one to laugh at the punch line."

These words, spoken by a mining unionist at the end of Maurice Bulbulian's *La Richesse Des Autres*, could have just as well been spoken by Bulbulian himself; the films that he has made since joining the NFB thirteen years ago remain little-known, not only in Canada but in Québec as well. His situation is not unique; it is echoed in frustration by most Québec filmmakers as they witness their cinema being in turn ignored, impeded, and ultimately strangulated. "But," concludes Bulbulian, "on a personal level, all you can do is keep on making films."

And this he does, like the radioman on a sinking ship, trying to send out as many S.O.S.'s as possible.

His latest film, *Les Gars Du Tabac*, was screened as part of the Critic's Festival in Montréal in August, and he has three films set for release this fall. His subjects have ranged from victims of urban renovation in Montréal's Little Burgundy slum district to Québec's forestry workers to miners in Québec and Chile; films whose interest go beyond one's backyard. Yet, even in his own backyard, Bulbulian remains unknown.

It is perhaps the subjects themselves which, in the present system, preclude the films' being shown and known. Or even the presentation itself, a kind of direct-cinema approach which promulgates the orchestration of alternative opinions by the filmmaker while letting the subject speak for himself. In other words, it is not the kind of thing film exhibitors are anxious to run in their theatres.

Replies Bulbulian, "No matter who the people are, the expression of their problems as they themselves see them has as much right to be shown on the CBC or in any theatre as does Sam Peckinpah's latest film."

Bulbulian's interest in film and his belief in the underdog's right to a well-organized and sophisticated presentation of his situation go back a long way. After spending his childhood in a parish hall watching Charlie Chan and Tarzan films, Bulbulian joined his high school's cine-club where, on the first night's program, he saw Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Flaherty's *The Land*. Parallels to Bulbulian's approach can be seen especially in the latter film; Flaherty broke from his established structure and, in *The Land*, digressed from the more global problems of farming to illustrate the consequences of such problems through personal stories told by farmers. This approach, combined with Ford's demonstration of the dramatic and textural potential of a socially-conscious cinema, finds its synthesis, albeit not always successful, in Bulbulian's documentaries. Of course, this is not to say that Bulbulian stands alone in this regard; his work falls in line with that of Brault, Perrault, King and others of the direct-cinema.

In terms of thematic expression, his films, although dealing with varied situations and conditions, are of people in transition trying to retain or regain control of their lives. In his first social document, *La P'tite Bourgogne* (1968), he took a year to follow a group of slum citizens faced with eviction who were trying to organize and deal themselves into the decision-making process. In *Un Lendemain Comme Hier* (1970), a family from rural Québec, now living in Montréal, goes back to their native Lac St-Jean for the blueberry picking season; the children, having lost interest in their

parents' traditions, decide to return to Montréal and, as a result, the parents are forced to evaluate their own move to the big city.

In *Dan Nos Forêts* (1971), part one of a trilogy on the Québec forest, workers try to revitalize their sagging wood industry by starting cooperatives; but community apathy and government interference doom their efforts. In *La Richesse Des Autres* (1973), Québec miners, in an attempt to find solutions to the problems inherent to their occupation, visit Chile to see the reality of nationalization but the context is too different and the Chilean experiment does not mesh with North American values. In *La Revanche* (1974), part two of the forest trilogy, pre-war efforts to form cooperatives are contrasted with the efforts documented in *Dans Nos Forêts. Les Gars Du Tabac* (1977) is a reportage on transient young Quebecers trying to find work in the tobacco fields of Ontario who meet with intolerance and unconcern instead. *Ameshkuatan*, to be released this fall and the last of the forest trilogy, documents the relationship between the Montagnais tribe and the forest, and how this relationship has been eroded by government relocation of the bands on seaside reserves far from the forest. *Tierra y Libertan* and *Amory Cumbia*, also to be released this fall, deal with the urban poor in Mexico and their efforts to organize and gain control of the land on which they live.



Bulbulian confers with the evicted residents of Little Burgundy

Far from being an intrusion, Bulbulian's crew and the film itself become part of the subject's movement towards and eventual solution to his problem; as most direct-cinema filmmakers, Bulbulian does not hesitate to act as a catalyst. In *La Richesse Des Autres*, he organized the trip to Chile. In *La P'tite Bourgogne*, he set up a meeting between the evicted citizens and municipal and provincial representatives in an NFB studio to clarify issues and assess the progress to date; in the same film, he organized a visit to a city housing project already completed by the Little Burgundy residents and invited Radio-Canada to report on the event. This visit forms one of the more chilling sequences in the film as we hear of the living conditions, complete with rent-a-cops, spies and overnight evictions, prevailing in the housing project.

Another aspect of Bulbulian's films, evident in other direct-cinema works, is the lack of chauvinism exhibited by the filmmaker towards his subjects: "We try to involve them in the process of developing a theme, to bring them into the adventure of filmmaking." The two Mexican films he had

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Faces etched into a fresco; a Québec miner confronts his Chilean counterparts in *La Richesse Des Autres*

using a feedback method usually associated with and perhaps facilitated by VTR. Bulbulian screened the eight hours of footage for the benefit of members of the Tierra Y Libertan organization of urban poor; the screening was followed by discussions between the members and Bulbulian after which he came back to Canada to do the rough cut. He returned to Mexico, screened the rough cut, had more discussions and then did the fine cut in Canada. Far from abdicating responsibility, Bulbulian makes clear for whose benefit the films are being made: the subjects learn as much from the cooperative process as do the filmmakers and the audience.

This type of thing, some might say, is perhaps better suited to video than film but Bulbulian, himself a former animator of Montréal's Videographe, replies:

"...the so-called democracy of communications. There was a mistake when they developed instruments of smaller resolution and gave them to 'the people' under the pretext of democratization. The reverse should have been done; that is opening up access to existing media with established instruments. The value of what you say is only worth the quality of your image. So, under the pretext of democratizing communications, less value was given to the image with these techniques (VTR). The same goes for Super 8... and, after all, 22/Cinema Canada

16mm. The ideal is 35mm but here you have economic restrictions. In the final analysis, with video you work with false impressions."

What does distinguish Bulbulian from other direct-cinema directors is his somewhat didactic attitude towards his audience, an attitude that perhaps came out of his early training as a scientist, his three years spent teaching sciences, and the dozen educational film-loops on scientific subjects that he made at the NFB prior to *La P'tite Bourgogne*. Although Bulbulian would balk at the suggestion that he is trying to teach the viewer something, the "lessons" in his films are clearly drawn using parallel situations to point out the dialectics of an issue.

This method is particularly evident in *La Richesse Des Autres* and in *La Revanche*. The former film, although dealing on the surface with the exploitation of Québec resources by outsiders, indicates a spiritual and political wealth which the Chileans had and that was lacking in Quebec. During one sequence, Chilean miners describe the steps they took to gain control of their mines, what the situation was like before the take-over and what they have gained from it. The scene switches to Québec where some miners and their families are sitting around a table covered with food. One of them asks, after enumerating his own problems, "What's the use of

making a revolution?" Cut back to Chile where Allende, in a speech to miners, answers, "Our revolution is one of collective socialism, to regain our dignity." Chilean miners go on to explain how they were drawn into servitude by the American owners of their mines, how they tried to be like "Yankees", and then, finally, talk disparagingly of American attitudes, "For Americans, life is money." Cut back once again to Québec where a miner's wife explains, "If I didn't have \$1,000, I couldn't live... my biggest hobby is shopping."

In *La Revanche*, the dialectic is drawn between the unsuccessful efforts of forestry workers to set up cooperatives in the '70s with the memories of a man who successfully set up co-ops in the '30s and '40s. Dramatic old footage of workers chopping wood and taking charge of their own sawmills is played against contemporary undertakings; here again, the founder of the early co-ops exudes a spiritual strength lacking in the '70s as he quotes from Savard's "Menaud Maître-Draveur", "We must have the courage to regain what we have lost."

Fortunately, his didactic and rational concerns do not submerge Bulbulian's humanism, for a great deal of his films' strength relies on intuitive rather than rational decisions. One example of this is Bulbulian's use of a highly effective and dramatic technique, the "guided tour" in *La P'tite Bourgogne*, an evicted resident walks along a boarded-up row of houses while giving us a run-down of who was living where, for how long, what their reactions were to the evictions, and

where they finally moved to. The man colors his tour with anecdotes about the people he mentions, delivering a kind of eulogy to the neighbourhood he grew up in. In *La Richesse Des Autres*, a similar tour is given by a mining unionist as he takes a helicopter ride over mines in Northern Québec, describing the conflicts, the closures, the abandoned towns and the mines that never opened. Aside from the dry facts, the audience is given to consider the quality of the speaker's voice, his intonations and colloquialisms, and insights into the issue at hand: incidental details which are nevertheless responsible for the films' human richness. But it also leaves the films open to accusations of a lack of rigor vis-à-vis their themes.

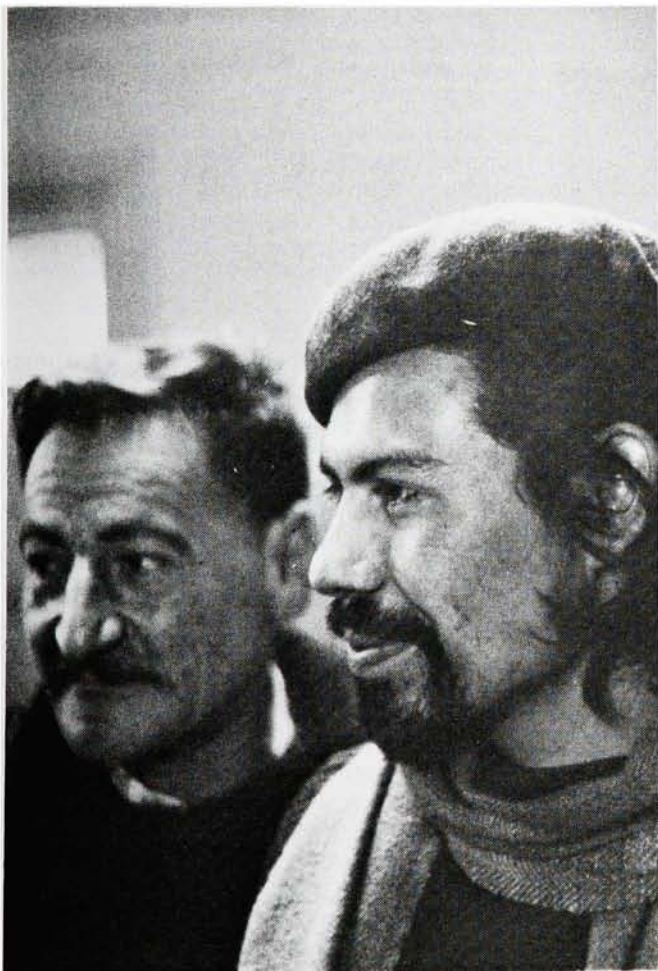
Bulbulian himself would be the last one to describe his approach as objective: *La P'tite Bourgogne* was to be a "film-choc" on the inherent injustice of massive evictions, but, as the filming progressed and as the producer, Robert Forget, tended towards a more objective and global film, packed with facts and opinions from both sides, Bulbulian became increasingly inclined towards what he describes as "an advanced subjectivity: a bias and a technique at the disposal of the citizens." This bias is evident from the very first shots; a surrealistic travel of a deserted Habitat '67 is followed by a travel along the streets of Little Burgundy into the backyard of a tenement where a large family sits in a swing-chair. The film goes beyond the obvious contrast as the family engages the filmmaker in some small talk which ends with the grandmother's rendition of an old song; the song echoes as the travel through Little Burgundy resumes. It is by putting a human face on the issues that Bulbulian hooks his audience. And it is when Bulbulian achieves a balance between the ideological and the personal that his films are most successful.

The best example of this is *La Richesse Des Autres*, whose location shooting was directed by Michel Gauthier. Aside from being a textbook illustration of the evolution of a political issue from personal problem to shared concern to political platform, it is an imposing fiasco of mining and of a miner's life, encompassing occupational diseases, family tensions, deterioration of physical and mental health, strikes, lock-outs, and the creation of ghost towns. The two concerns, far from engaging in a useless diatribe, complement each other as the film switches back and forth from the private statement of a problem to its discussion in a political forum.

"Some people wanted to see a better defined political line," says Bulbulian. "But I found that it was more important to represent the miner's state of mind than to turn him into a Marxist."

The film begins with an expressionistic sequence in a mine where young miners walk in the dark tunnels, the beams from their flashlights reflecting off the wet walls and from pools of water, to the accompaniment of the stark, lonely sound of slowly dripping water. The sound carries over to a travel inside the changing rooms where helmets and waterproof gear hang in blueish light. Then back into the mines, to what Orwell described in 1937 as "...my own mental picture of hell. Most of the things one imagines in hell are there — heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air and above all, unbearably cramped space. Everything except the fire, for there is no fire down there..."

From there, the film moves back up to the kitchens, taverns and picket lines, wherever miners congregate. There, we find scenes of great emotional impact; a young miner looks



Attracting his audience by putting a human face on the issues.
A Chilean miner in *La Richesse Des Autres*

at his father who has spent thirty of his fifty years in the mines, "I look at you, dad, and I have to say it, you're finished." The young miner then turns to his wife and asks, "What am I going to be like at 40?"

Elsewhere, a young miner, about to be married, talks of the difficulty of maintaining relations with his future wife when he spends most of his day doing back-breaking work in the mines. He decides to quit the mines in favor of a normal life. In one of the last scenes, an old miner sitting around a camp-fire lists the diseases that plague him as a result of mining; cellicose, arthritis, bronchitis and alcoholism. He switches to listing with pride the trinkets the company has awarded him for not having accidents: a copper ashtray, a knife and a belt that reads "4,000 shifts." He concludes, "It makes me sad... I would have liked to have had a life like the others."

These scenes are bracketed by union rallies, speeches denouncing the injustices and the visit to Chile. The film concludes with the song-chant, "It's only the beginning, continue the struggle," over a montage of the miner's marriage, Québec and Chilean miners trading songs and jigs and a union congress in the Forum. It is an exhaustive work with a solid direction to follow, a balance well kept and as a result, a textural integrity from beginning to end.

Unfortunately, this is not the case with **Les Gars Du Tabac**. It is an atmospheric grab-bag of undeveloped themes; intolerance due to racism, transient versus sedentary life styles and conflicting work ethics. To the accompaniment of some blues by the group Offenbach, the camera tracks – in languid long shots – youths hitch-hiking, looking for work, loitering in Delhi's town park. There are snippets of work on the fields, youths being beaten up at night, a choir in the park, authorities shrugging responsibility. But the total does not add up to much.

Bulbulian himself calls it a film "in passing". It was originally set to be part of a larger work called **Le Temps Des Fêtes** which was to contrast the St-Jean festivities with the daily lives of people caught up in another kind of reality; a waitress in the Laurentians, the wives of United Aircraft strikers and the youths in Ontario tobacco fields. But, once the material had been shot, it did not hold its own; the approach was deemed too artificial. As a consequence, **Les Gars Du Tabac** was released, perhaps in desperation.

It is unfortunate that it had to be so, for the film holds the seed of a documentary that would have brought home a situation one usually associates with migrant workers in the U.S., a racism which has, in the past, led to lynchings in Ontario. But the film is but an embryo brought to term too quickly.

What perhaps motivates Bulbulian to put his craft at the disposal of the underdog is the awareness that, now more than ever, he and his colleagues are in danger of extinction, that the kind of documentary that, up to now, he has made is faced with insurmountable difficulties, especially economic restrictions.

"I refuse to make sponsored films. They are not what they used to be; companies are more and more conscious of the nature of the mass media. When Flaherty made **Louisiana Story** for Carnegie, he was able to make a film and not propaganda. Now, that kind of thing is impossible... People have distorted Malraux's Cinema, it is an art but it is also an industry by over emphasizing the word 'industry'. It's through the economy that they have us by the balls.



La P'tite Bourgogne's social hierarchy: Mayor Drapeau at the top, the peasants at the bottom and the artists in the middle

"The present crisis in Québec cinema exists solely on the level of an economic system that is being imposed on Canada; everywhere, creativity is being strangled at the base. In our society, filmmakers, along with poets, are those who have the least access to the public and who are the least heard.

"There's a whole generation of filmmakers right behind us to whom we throw nickels and dimes to fight over so they can finish a little film. These artisans are filmmakers in the real sense of the word. The politicians talk about conserving our heritage and go ape over an 18th century wrought-iron plaque while there are a hundred filmmakers who aren't allowed to work. That, they don't care about."

Without becoming a knight in shining armor, one is assured that Bulbulian and others like him, will continue to fight for what he believes, not only for himself, but for his subjects as well.

"There are alternatives to the government's opinion and public opinion has been deformed by polls and statistics. The system has developed a way of transmitting messages and I have developed, in cooperation with my subjects, a way of transmitting messages which are often in contradiction with those of the government... There was a big stink raised in Parliament over the \$150,000 that was spent on **La Richesse Des Autres**, that public funds were spent to publicize problems in the mining industry. Well, during that time, Noranda Co. made six or seven commercials at \$50,000 each... I think that, in a democratic society where freedom of speech supposedly exists, it is only just and normal that, if Noranda can spend \$300,000 to publicize its opinions, miners are entitled to \$150,000 from the government to give their own diverging opinion. In that context, it is essential that the miner's opinion be as well organized as possible. It is not enough to shove a microphone in front of somebody just because it is his opinion; he has a right to as many fades and dissolves as Noranda." □