

association cooperative de productions audio-visuelles

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~ kirwan cox

Have you ever wondered whether a production cooperative could actually work without merely becoming another bankrupt company? L'Association coopérative des productions audio-visuelles has been working for over two years in Montreal to provide young Quebec filmmakers with a real alternative to the film industry.

So far it has succeeded to the point where more feature films are being made at the co-op than in any private production house in Quebec. The co-op has about 60 members and is run by a five man board of directors which decides which projects the co-op will produce.

All the members are young and all the ones I have spoken with over the years are quite dedicated to the co-op and the ideals it represents (though they sometimes cannot make up their minds what those ideals are). It has two and one half salaried employees, one of which is Marc Daigle, the executive director. The board of directors includes Guy Bergeron, Daigle, Roger Frappier, Alain Chartrand and Jean Rival.

The co-op has been an idea kicking around Quebec for many years, but no matter how much good will or need there was – there was never any money to begin. That changed in the fall of 1969 when the Canadian Film Development Corporation announced that it would give \$50,000 grants to the filmmakers of the three major cities. The filmmakers in Vancouver and Toronto cut up the pie and ran off with the pieces in all directions. There is very little result to be seen from that money now.

In Montreal, many young filmmakers were employed with production companies but were not allowed to make their own films. Roger Frappier was one. He has since finished the feature *Le Grand Film Ordinaire* and is now working on the feature *Allo Toul'monde* at the co-op, a documentary about poet Raoul Duguay and the band L'infonie.

"We have all the young filmmakers which is difficult", said Frappier, "because we are their last chance. The other companies have refused them. In Quebec you have 10 old

filmmakers who each have their own production company and 20-30 young filmmakers with one – the co-op. The young ones therefore can't make as many films."

"I'm really impressed by the work of young filmmakers like André Forcier. His film *Barcelone* (Les Ateliers du cinéma québécois) will be good. Michel Bouchard and Jean Chabot are also impressive. The older ones like Carle and Heroux disillusion me."

"The CFDC has killed the dialectic way of filmmaking in Quebec. Before 1968 we were making movies particular to Quebec. Now we are making fiction movies like the Americans. You can't become international before you have a nationalist cinema. Jutra is different. He put something very Québécois into an American format with *Mon Oncle Antoine*. It is the first film that polarized filmmakers here. It is very classical in construction and Québécois in theme."

He remembers "We all went to the CFDC, about 12 or 16. We told them we wanted to start a production co-op. We didn't want to split the money up like they did on the west coast. The first year was very difficult."

Joseph Beaubien works at the CFDC and recalls, "They said they preferred to have a co-op. The CFDC wanted to make sure the group was representative of filmmakers in Quebec. They gave us a list of about 35 names and we decided that they were representative. They submitted a budget – mostly for equipment".

The new production co-op was given \$50,000 and, according to the CFDC's Michael Spencer, a number of small production companies complained that the CFDC was subsidizing their competition. Spencer says that for some reason there have been no such complaints recently.

The co-op spent \$18,000 on equipment including a Nagra tape recorder, an Eclair camera, one KEM editing table. They spent \$7,000 the first year on production expenses and \$25,000 on administration – salaries, telephone, rent, etc. The top two floors of an old mansion on the corner of Sherbrooke

and St. Urbain streets above a Marxist bookstore has been their headquarters ever since. One co-op member called it "a free city in the middle of Montreal".

In the beginning the growing pains were predictable. No one had ever been in a production co-op before and each filmmaker had his or her own idea about how to run one. Should they pay money for staff? How should they decide which projects to back? Could they give the equipment out free? Some seemed to want a "big family" and others "chrome and marble".

The first decision was to make Pierre Harel's film *Bulldozer* the first co-op production. Harel's project actually predated the formation of the co-op and it was a catastrophe. That nearly finished the co-op. One member said "We began with a very painful experience". Frappier: "*Bulldozer* makes me sad. It was to be a video experiment and then they changed to 16mm. After *Bulldozer* all young filmmakers had trouble — they were stereotyped". Beaubien says, "*Bulldozer* went way overbudget and left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. It is still unfinished. After that they had a soul searching, changed administration and directors".

This was the low point when the grand experiment seemed tarnished. However, other films were being made such as Alain Chartrand's *Isis au 8* and short films. The filmmakers still had faith in their co-op and it seemed the CFDC did too because they gave another \$50,000. Once again \$50,000 was divided up in pieces by filmmakers in Vancouver while Toronto filmmakers got \$10,000.

The second \$50,000 helped purchase additional camera equipment, lights, and a Steenbeck editing table. \$30,000 went to support administrative functions in the second year.

Then the CFDC approved Mirielle Dansereau's feature *La Vie Revée* which was shot in super 16 and brought in on budget by producer Guy Bergeron. This film had a successful run at the Festival Cinema in Montreal (grossing \$20,000 in seven weeks with the theatre taking 80 per cent and the co-op not getting "un sou") and won two Etrogs at the Canadian Film Awards.

About *La Vie Revée*, Beaubien says "We liked the script and the budget so we decided to invest 55 per cent. This experience helped us to formalize our thinking on the low budget program we now have". *La Vie Revée* has been the single greatest proof to date that the co-op works. Beaubien added "The fact the co-op can stay together and work together gives them an advantage. They have done a good job — you can see what they've done on the screen".

But the co-op is not just product — it is an attitude. Frappier said "working at the co-op means having complete freedom to make my film my way. We do things collectively. We have discussions about the scripts. One of the problems and good things about the co-op is that we don't put ideological limitations on the scripts. We produce films that we disagree with because we have faith in the filmmaker. The co-op is quite open — many filmmakers come on weekends to shoot a lot of films people don't know about.

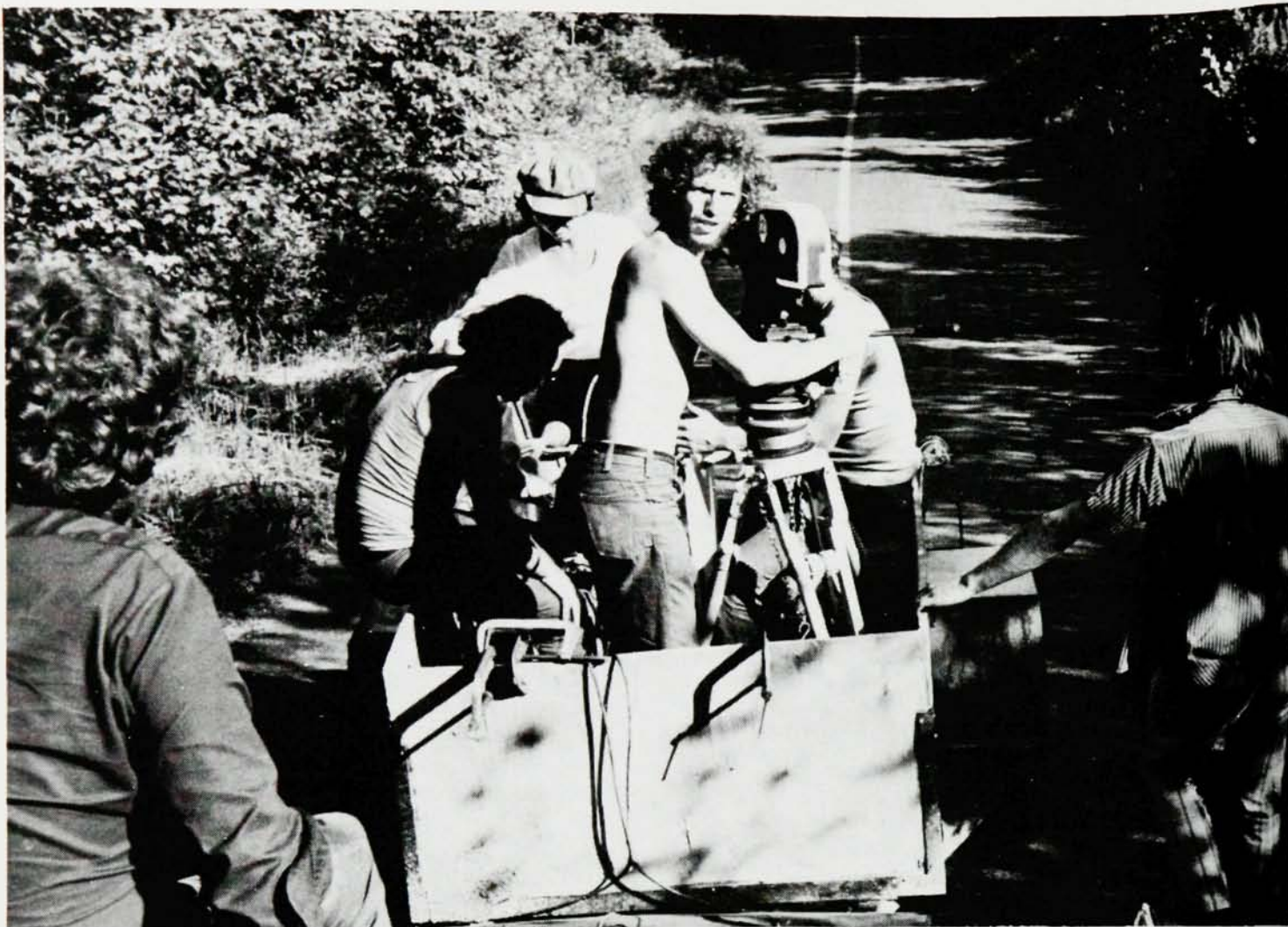
"We can't produce all the films. Now there is a need for another co-op. We started out making the films everyone else refused and now we are refusing some films. Who will produce these films? The next step may be to give the place to people who were like us at the beginning and make our next films somewhere else because it would be easier for us now."

Jean Chabot is directing *Une Nuit en Amérique* which is the co-op's biggest production since *La Vie Revée* and will be

In the co-op's office, from left to right, Jean Chabot (Une Nuit en Amérique), Guy Bergeron (Board of Directors), Roger Frappier (Le Grand Film Ordinaire, Allo Toul'Monde) and Marc Daigle (Executive Director, member of Advisory Committee for CFDC).



Photo: Alain Guigere



On location, shooting Jean-Guy Noel's "Tu Brûles... Tu Brûles".

distributed by Cinépix. Chabot said "You can't be yourself at the NFB. Getting on our own was the first step. We had to form a young team. The co-op is a school. It is not what is made but the way of making it, the method, that is slowly changing. We have to be able to breathe freely with a camera. Forming the co-op was a political act. We took away the boss and proved we could do it anyway".

Guy Bergeron is also producing Chabot's film. He said "The co-op is the most honest place. Maybe it is naïve, but it is only busy making films and is not busy being successful as a company".

Frappier: "You have an incredible thing here — 50 per cent of the co-op members have keys and come here every day. Nothing is locked and we have had nothing stolen."

Chabot: "No I could not make a feature any place else. I go where the action is. Also, I think the co-op is more professional than the companies. The young technicians here are better than a lot of the so-called professional ones who are 40. The younger ones want to work more."

"The situation in which you work here is quite clear. You know where the money is, where it comes from, and where it goes. There is no question of profit that makes money suddenly disappear. When you work at the NFB it is not so clear. Here questions are between me and Marc or me and Guy, and the NFB questions are between me and you and 'them'."

One indication of the dedication of the filmmakers to the co-op idea is their system of financing short films and "unofficial" productions. Bergeron tried to explain: "Imagine the big films as the superstructure. For example, the sound engineer on my film is the same as on Roger's and he gets paid for both. But there is two months in between that he doesn't get paid. However, he comes here every day and works on another type of production that it is impossible to produce anywhere else." "This means that we can produce a 50 minute black and white film for \$1000" said Frappier.

Even the big films are produced inexpensively. The features at the co-op have budgets that range between \$80,000 and \$130,000. Aside from the above mentioned films these include Jean-Guy Noel's *Tu Brûles... Tu Brûles* and Michel Zouchard's *Blanc Noël*. The co-op is considering about 25 future projects.

Production is not the main problem of the production co-op. It is distribution and exhibition. Frappier: "Distribution is *the* problem of cinema. People who make money on films are the exhibitors and distributors — not the producers. The fact that more than 50 per cent of the theatres in Montreal belong to the Americans is the first problem of exploitation. We don't have our own organization".

Daigle: "We must get to the people directly. One problem is that the CFDC forces us to get a distributor on expensive films and then they control us. With *La Vie Revée* we had to have

Faroun's participation to get CFDC backing."

Bergeron: "La Vie Revée proved a form of cooperative production is possible with lower budgets at fair quality. La Vie Revée was a guinea pig for the \$100,000 projects and we are doing two of those without having to find a distributor in advance. This means the films will probably be distributed in a cooperative way."

Frappier: "For 5-6 months we have been thinking very seriously about opening our own cinema. We have to see how it will work. In New York Warhol and Mekas have their own cinemas - at least they get some money back. I will give an example of what happens now."

Q-*bec My Love* by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre cost \$25,000 to produce. It was all his money and Famous Players showed it in Montreal. The film grossed \$150,000 and Lefebvre got back only \$7,000. *Le Grand Film Ordinaire* was shown at the Verdi for 5 days and made \$1400 but the house net was \$2000 for 5 days. The distributor received nothing and I received nothing and we both put money into advertising. We do all the work and they get all the money.

"I want an exhibitor to go 50-50. Maybe he will lose money but he can put in a commercial film next. Let the exhibitor share some of our risks. For me, nationalization of the theatres is the only answer."



Photo: Alain Guigere

Roger Frappier, Marc Daigle, and Guy Bergeron

"The political problem of Quebec does not have a cinematographic answer - the answer is political. So many filmmakers are working on a political level rather than making political films. We do produce some political films, but the real problem is how to show them."

"The Société St-Jean Baptiste is very nationalist and they commissioned a film about Quebec from a socialist filmmaker. The film was against the economic system and they just put it on the shelf. The union council commissioned a film by Lamôthe and they don't show it because there is not enough syndicalism in it."

"We have to change everything. The labs make profits which are invested outside the country. Cinevision is a rental company that made its money off French-Canadian productions and now is investing \$3 1/2 million in 10 American productions in the U.S. We need cooperative distribution, exhibition, everything. The only answer is if Quebec becomes an independent and socialist state. Then we will be able to change some things."

"The type of film I want to do is not the film I'm doing at the moment because I'm not living in the type of society I would like to live in." ●



Photo: Alain Guigere

The co-op occupies the top two floors of the corner building, above the bookstore.

Television doesn't seem to be an alternative access to the public for co-op filmmakers. Radio-Canada was held up as much worse than CBC. (Something I felt was not possible). As Frappier put it, "The film structure in Montreal is different than Toronto. We don't have any relations with Radio Canada. They are ten times more bastards than in Toronto. At least Toronto filmmakers like Don Owen and Allan King can work for the CBC."

"Here they would rather pay \$14,000 for a ten year old French film than \$5,000 for a new Quebec film. It is a colonial state of mind. The buyers are all Frenchmen."

Bergeron added, "Nothing is open to us. Take Radio-Québec which should be an opening but it's not because of the structure of the Quebec government. The Office du Film du Québec is not an opening because they don't have any money. I think they would help us if they did have some."

Frappier: "I would like to do films for television because it is a different market. If we do a film for general release we are stuck with the exploiters. You know we even have to watch channel six in English for the news because they censor everything on Radio-Canada. That is another type of colonialism. We even have to go through the other culture for our information."

On location, shooting "Tu Brûles, Tu Brûles"



Photo: Daniel Langervin