

the state of quebec

Quebec is at a crossroads, and the decisions – both federal and provincial – which will be made in the coming months are crucial. Taking stock of the situation of feature filming in the province, Jean-Pierre Tadros traces a sombre portrait.

by Jean-Pierre Tadros

The election of the Parti Québécois has created a sort of 'before and after' effect, a temptation to evaluate what had come before in order to better measure what is to come afterwards. One would like to look back and say that the state of cinema in Quebec on November 15 was strong and healthy, that the directors and producers, not to mention the technicians, were in good form. Alas! Nothing could be farther from the truth. To be fair, *le cinéma québécois* is still struggling along but its condition has become critical. The months ahead will tell whether the illness is terminal.

Before the elections, the milieu was quickly deteriorating. Production was at an all-time low. The relationships between the provincial government and the private sector were deplorable and the relationships within the industry weren't much better. The producers and unions were at each other's throats over working conditions. Strikes, lockouts and even injunctions were being used to hold the negotiations together. It was as if some suicidal game were being played; the victim was to be that sometimes pesky, often beautiful, usually invigorating and revealing phenomenon, *le cinéma québécois*.

Suddenly, the election brought a halt to the in-fighting. Here was perhaps the last chance to salvage Quebec's most visible art form. If ever cinema would flourish in the province, it would be now. The producers and the unions soon came to an agreement after nine months of conflict. The government cleaned house at the Direction générale du cinéma et de l'audio-visuel and appointed Michel Brulé, a competent film scholar and administrator, as director. It also cleared the way to the Institut québécois du cinéma by naming all seven members and calling a meeting. First aid has

been given. It remains to be seen whether the government can and will take the proper steps to help the industry out of its economic and spiritual depression. Perhaps it is already too late.

For the last few years, there's been an uneasy feeling, the sense of something going wrong. The 'cinema' milieu reflected the malaise which ran through Quebec and which, finally, brought in the new government. Perhaps it should have been expected that a generation which was brought up during the 'quiet revolution' would have grown up thinking big. Too big! *La folie des grandeurs*. Quebec's cinema was to pay dearly for trying to embody those dreams.

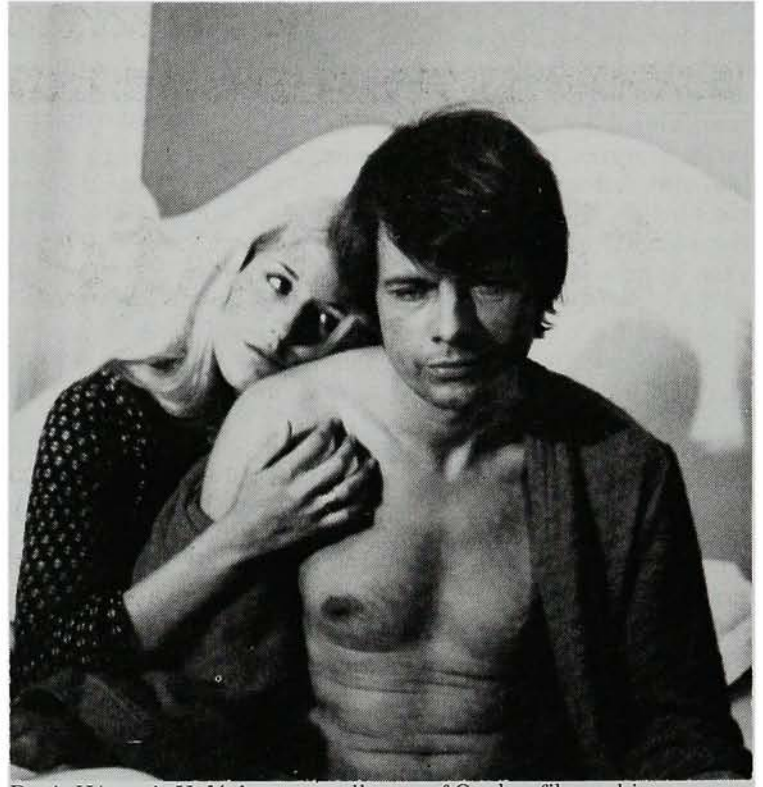
Today it seems clear that during the period between Expo '67 and the 1976 Olympics, cinema in Quebec lived through a heady, crazy period. From a modest enterprise, it grew out of all proportion. Everything had become possible, even the impossible dream. It was a period during which the entire society participated in an affirmation of its identity. In some of its forms, this affirmation – aptly symbolized by the Olympics – bordered on disaster, on ruin. The films of this period, at least some of them, reflected this collective will. The mood was grandiose and so were the projects. Never mind that the undertakings were dangerous and perhaps foolish.

The Origins

In the beginning, in the '60s, cinema in Quebec was the simple and direct expression of the reality of that society. It was a cinema without frills. The *cinéma direct* of Michel Brault, Gilles Groulx, Claude Jutra and Jean-Pierre Lefebvre had made an enviable reputation for Quebec. And that might



A scene from *Le mépris n'aura qu'un temps* by Arthur Lamothe



Denis Héroux's *Valérie* was an allegory of Quebec filmmaking

have been enough. But no. It wasn't long before fiction began to beckon, and the directors followed, losing their heads and sometimes their souls.

How short memory is, and how removed the 1950s seemed. Back then, Quebec had the embryo of a feature film industry and saw that it couldn't be made to work. Once the Duplessis years were over, no one was willing to look back and to remember the lessons learned. Once again, the challenge of the fictional feature took over.

A Commercial Cinema

New filmmakers emerged. It was time again to prove that *le cinéma québécois* could also mean commercial cinema, time to win the place which the American films occupied on the screens of the province. Foolhardy and vaguely unaware, Denis Héroux made *Valérie* in 1969. The miracle had begun. It was a small film whose only redeeming virtue was to tell a simple story, full of overblown symbolism: one which everyone could read correctly and with which he could identify. A wave of recognition swept over the public. The image of this young girl, running away from the convent to the life of the big city, tempted by all the evils therein, undressing in front of the cameras as she turned to prostitution, was terrific. To hell with the old system. Then, finally, and importantly, she finds true love, gives up her sinful ways and lives happily ever after. If ever there was a story about having it both ways, *Valérie* was it.

What we didn't realize then was that Héroux, symbolically, was also tracing the route that *le cinéma québécois* was to take. Héroux gave birth to a cinema which wanted desperately to free itself from the hold of the National Film Board. Although literally all the filmmakers at work then had received their training at the Board, there was mutiny in the ranks. The golden days of French production were coming to an end. The problem was that as the filmmakers left the NFB they turned their backs on the documentary form as well. Both producers and directors formed companies and aimed for the big time, setting *le cinéma direct* – the pride of Quebec – aside.

Once in town, the filmmakers suffered temptations, not the least of which were the big American films on the screens everywhere. The example given by the home-town boys, Gilles Groulx, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Gilles Carle and Jacques Godbout, was one of quality and originality; they made films which were the antithesis of the American film. Certainly that wasn't the route to success. The solution became one of borrowing the American recipe and modifying it to suit the Québécois palate. So *le cinéma québécois* – or better, the cinema 'made in Quebec' – latched onto the wave of eroticism. And who should carry the wave along but the federal government, which had decided by then to help the cinema industry.

The Canadian Film Development Corporation

Created in 1967, the Canadian Film Development Corporation was looking for an industry to help. It needed to invest, and it needed to make that money turn a profit. It is thanks to the intervention of the CFDC that there is anything vaguely resembling a feature film industry today.

It became important to make money out of an industry which, by all reasonable estimations, was just not going to be profitable. And in Quebec, 'where the action was' in the early days, there developed a kind of psychosis. Every film which was produced had to make money at all costs, and the rules of the game were those which the Americans had laid down oh so long ago. Formulas followed formulas, stars followed stars, until the public became exhausted and disenchanted. For the myth which still haunts English Canada – that the public in Quebec loves its own films and is doggedly faithful to them – was true for only a few years in Quebec. That public is no more stupid than any other public, and there was a limit to how many times they would accept the same warmed-up meal, despite variations in the sauce.

The successive waves of films rolled over a public which was growing increasingly skeptical. After the formula-makers had run through eroticism, they added comedy, creating

Quebec's all-time biggest grosser, **Deux femmes en or** by Claude Fournier. The sequels were dreary failures.

Erotic comedy gave way to straight comedy; the public had grown weary of nudes and mediocrity. After **Loving and Laughing** came **Keep It in the Family** and the others: **Tiens-toi bien après les oreilles à papa**, **J'ai mon voyage**, **Tout feu tout femme**. All were equally forgettable. Comedy was the stuff of the local television programs and the films used the same stars, scenarists and situations. The public soon gave up, deciding that it was easier to sit at home than to go out if nothing new was to be offered.

Trying for a film for the whole family, one enterprising producer even dreamed up a Québécois western, **Mustang**. By this time the public had simply decided that if a film was "Québécois", it was bad. In fact, the distributors were accused of overkill, of billing each film as the 'biggest and the best' until they turned off a deceived public.

Meanwhile, Lefebvre, Jutra and Carle were still making films, defending their right to make *films d'auteur*. And at the NFB, Jacques Leduc, Jacques Godbout, Gilles Groulx and Clément Perron were into fictional films which avoided the formulas and which were often passionate personal statements.

Hard on the heels of the older generation came the young filmmakers: Jean Chabot, Michel Bouchard, Francis Mankiewicz, Jean-Guy Noël and André Forcier. Almost to a man, they couldn't get their films in front of the audiences and they fought their way into a film industry which was out of breath, dying of sclerosis.

Through it all, with admirable regularity, the Michel Braults, Pierre Perraults and Maurice Bulbulians would give us another film, a documentary, underlining how grand the *cinéma direct* could be and forcing others to wonder how filming in Quebec and gone so astray.

The Law Concerning Cinema

Even after the disaffection of the public, the commercial filmmakers tried and tried again, finally forcing the provincial government to intervene. There had been pressure on

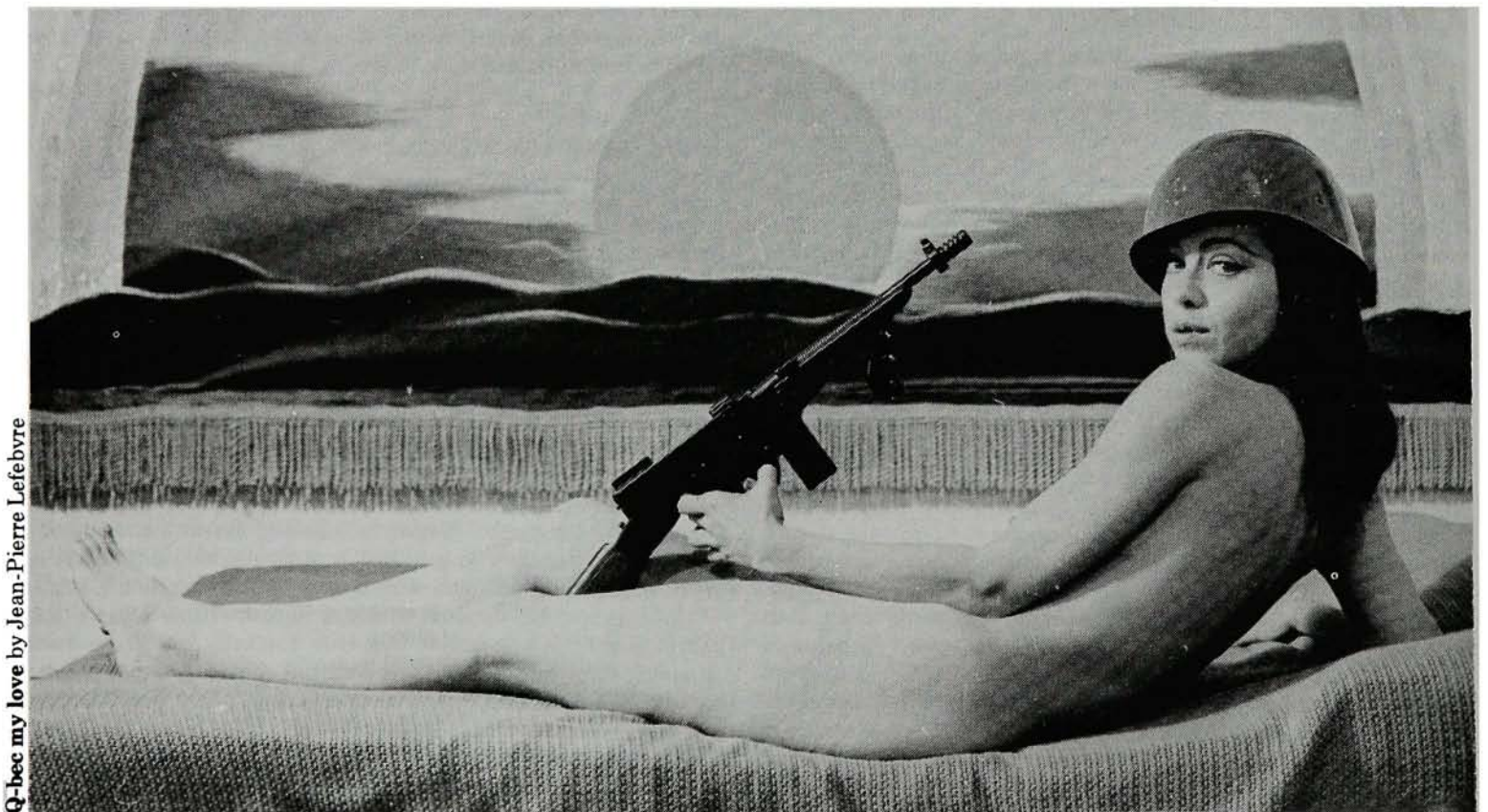
the government before – in fact, for 12 years – but the appeal had fallen on deaf ears. Now, the situation was critical. The Fédération québécoise des membres de l'industrie cinématographique, which regrouped all sectors of the industry, had dissolved itself, having first thrown out the Montreal Film Board (the 'major' distributors). The Association des réalisateurs occupied the Censor Board. The other associations dusted off the briefs which had been written over the years. Salvation was to come by way of a new law. A young Liberal minister, Denis Hardy, had it written. But then, it was easy for him since he knew so little about filming in the first place.

For better or for worse, the National Assembly voted Law No. 1 into existence in June 1975. The generosity of the law and its promise of millions was tarnished only by the evident will of the government to put the entire industry in tutelage. The directors, technicians and actors protested vigorously. The producers, distributors and exhibitors were more discreet but equally upset. In the period which followed filmmaking came to an absolute standstill and the lobbying began. Never was a minister so sought after.

Instead of heralding a fresh start for the industry, the law signaled the beginning of the end. Scandals in the government and internecine battles in the industry were the only sign of life over the last year. It took Hardy 18 months to name five of the seven members of the Institut which the law had created. It took more than 20 months before the DGCA had a permanent director. One wondered whether there was not a conscious desire to let the situation worsen in order to exercise fuller control over it later. Looking around us today, one sees that the covert forces which have long affected Canadian cinema, and especially commercial filming in Quebec, may be close to this goal.

The Abyss

That's how Claude Jutra got to Toronto and then to Vancouver to make two lovely films for television... in English. And why Gilles Carle went out to the country with a 16mm camera to make a film in black and white while **Exit** gets



Q-bec my love by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre



A musical moment from **Réjeanne Padovani** by Denys Arcand

postponed time and again. The latter will be filmed... in English and in French... if and when Carole Laure finishes her co-production with Yves Montand. Francis Mankiewicz and André Théberge continue to work for English television and Denys Arcand has withdrawn, having made nothing since **Gina**.

Is it a coincidence that two films which were selected for special screenings at the Cannes Festival last year have just had their commercial releases in Montreal this March? André Forcier's **L'eau chaude l'eau froide** and Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's **L'amour blessé** are as good as films in Quebec are likely to be at any time. And is it any wonder that the latest films by Pierre Perrault were seen in Paris early this year and are only scheduled for release in Quebec this April?

This is not to say that nothing's happening in Quebec. Shooting is still going on, but the price is high, and few are ready to discuss just how high. The co-productions are parading through, picking up a bit of cash on their way elsewhere. Sophia Loren and Donald Sutherland attract a lot of attention, but no one here pretends that they have anything to do with *le cinéma québécois*. The federal government, however, looks on these films with a friendly eye, and since there are still those in Quebec in search of an international market to hook a Québécois film to, it's easier to look the other way for the moment.

Still, co-productions aren't at the root of the malaise which exists; it's the way the co-productions are being organized and the fact that our cinema is being fashioned by financiers and lawyers and not by the craftsmen who could make it great. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre has just finished **Le vieux pays où Rimbaud est mort**; it will probably be at the next Cannes festival. Surely he has compromised nothing by making it under the Franco-Canadian co-production treaty. But can

the same be said for Denis Héroux with his Anglo-Canadian co-production **The Uncanny**?

Finies les Folies

One day, not so long ago, a 'great' Canadian politician got angry and shouted "finies les folies", that's enough! Trudeau's words only provoked the opposite reaction and things have been getting curiouseer and curiouseer ever since. Is it any wonder that recent films like **Ti-Cul Tougas** by Jean-Guy Noël and **Ti-Mine, Bernie pis la gang** are full of dreams about running away to California and Florida? Is it surprising that Brassard and Tremblay have made a touching but meager film about individual happiness? When Quebec has nothing more to offer, what are you going to make films about? Denys Arcand was smart enough to hold his tongue. Too bad that other Québécois filmmakers didn't see things his way.

Nevertheless, life goes on, and *le cinéma québécois* refuses to give up the ghost quite so easily. It survives, thanks to Pierre Perrault who, in **Un royaume vous attend**, takes to task the technocrats who haven't yet finished dismantling the province. Thanks too to Michel Brault who, with **Le son des Français d'Amérique**, has made one of the most beautiful films of recent years. Arthur Lamothe has given the Indians of Quebec's northeast coast the right to speak out in **Carcajou et le péril blanc**, and Michel Moreau is making educational films which will reach beyond their normally restrained boundaries to a greater public. The fight is going on, thanks to those who still work in the maquis, trying to keep our cinema from becoming international just for the hell of it.

In trying to resuscitate *le cinéma québécois*, the new government has accepted a terrible gamble; the odds are against it, but these odds can be – and must be – changed. □