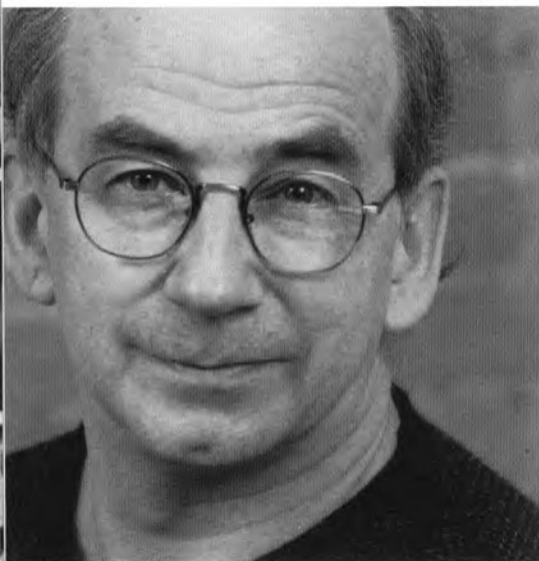




La plante humaine. Hébert is arguably Canada's greatest living example of how aesthetically complex and politically relevant animation can be.

All photos courtesy of the National Film Board

Pierre Hébert



When Luis Buñuel dragged his nocturnal razor across an eyeball in *Un chien andalou*, he created an indelible image of human vision literally exploding, an appalling metaphor of the physicality of seeing, and a visceral reminder of the fragility of sight in a harsh, violent world. A few decades later and further north, another cinematic genius would physically violate a visual medium, albeit an inanimate one. Scottish-born Canadian animator Norman McLaren revolutionized cinema when he began to scratch images directly onto the surface of film emulsion. This extraordinary violation of the very material of film would, like Buñuel's bravura

image, suggest a new set of cinematic possibilities and influence generations of animators around the world. Revealing the processes of creation within his animated films, McLaren offered still further formal and thematic directions for animation, already cinema's infinitely malleable form. Although his influence can be seen in animation all over the world, there is one Canadian animator whose work both incorporates and reinvents McLaren's legacy. His name is Pierre Hébert.

One of Canada's most respected and internationally renowned animators, Hébert has had a remarkable career, producing more than 20 short pieces since the mid-1960s as well as his first



Scratching THE SURFACE

THE ANIMATED ART OF PIERRE HEBERT

BY TOM MCSORLEY

feature-length film, *La plante humaine*, in 1996. His early works range from abstract computer animation to luminous combinations of animation styles to arresting hybrids of live action and animation. In many senses a comprehensive catalogue of Hébert's entire career to date, *La plante humaine* amplifies the quietly radical politic of pacifism and environmentalism found in his earlier films. With its startling blend of live-action sequences and animation techniques ranging from figurative to abstract, *La plante humaine* mines what for Hébert is an insistent, richly textured thematic vein: the problem of representation in the late 20th century. Like many other contemporary Canadian filmmakers

working in narrative, documentary and experimental modes, Hébert is engaged in exploring the crisis of empiricism in our image-saturated culture: how can we know what we see is real? How can we construct knowledge in our technologically mediated context of artifice and simulation? For an experimental animator like Pierre Hébert, who literally shapes every single image in his films by hand, these are vital, politically charged questions.

Born in Montreal in 1944, Hébert studied anthropology and made several abstract animated works before joining the NFB in 1965. Both inspired and deeply influenced by the films of Norman McLaren, Hébert describes him as "my spiritual father,

the man who helped me decide to become an animator.... [It is] from McLaren [that] I learned that exploring film technique cannot be dissociated from artistic creation. It is a profound lesson which I've tried to apply faithfully in my work. His influence on my approach to the art of animation goes far beyond technique (engraving, pixillation and so on); it's his respect for the process of creation that I always try to keep in my work. I am very lucky to have been around him." Appropriately, the animation union, ASIFA-Canada, awarded the first-ever Norman McLaren Heritage Award to Hébert at the 1988 Ottawa International Animation Festival.



La plante humaine:

Formally freewheeling, thematically dizzying and visually overwhelming.

Hébert renders images of a troubled world as seen through the eyes of a child. Locating the relationship between how you see and what you see in the innocent perceptions of children, Hébert's work is a clever, impassioned plea for a sustainable future.

In his early abstract films from the mid-1960s, *Op Hop-Hop Op* and *Opus 3*, Hébert's fascination with the artificiality of images is evident. It would evolve into a fuller expression in *Autour de la perception*, an investigation of the processes of image construction. A collection of abstract and geometrical shapes set in motion, the images for this film were produced by McGill University's IBM computers. After several more abstract pieces, Hébert produced a film totally different in style and incorporating more of his political conscience. *Père Noël, père Noël* is a delightfully dark attack on the commercialization of Christmas, combining live action documentary sequences with simple drawn animation.

Increasingly in his work during the 1970s, Hébert fused his sophisticated formal structures with direct social and political observation and criticism. In the 1980s, it was clear that he was moving toward a more forceful articulation of what his films have always suggested: how you perceive may well determine what you perceive. Like all artists, Hébert responded to the primary tensions of his times. As the depths of Cold War politics deepened during the early 1980s, it is not surprising that a concern for the process of perception emerged as a predominant, if not the defining motif in Hébert's extraordinary work since the beginning of that turbulent decade.

In 1982, Hébert produced his first masterpiece, *Souvenirs de guerre*. Combining a bold engraving animation technique with newsreel footage of various international conflicts, the film is a ferocious denunciation of war and the consequence of its spiritual, material and personal devastation. Dedicated to his son ("For Etienne, not quite one, engraved on film by his father..."), it not only anticipates *La plante humaine* in its pacifist anger and vivid imagery, but also presages his next film, which concerns itself with dangerous social and political energies that threaten the future of all humanity. In *Etienne et Sara*, named after his two children,

Perhaps to avoid being seen as merely a didactic, declarative moralist, Hébert's next few films are less overtly political and incorporate more improvisational elements, more open-ended structures. In *Chants et danses du monde inanimé-le métro*, a tone poem about life in the flux of Montreal's subway system, the soundtrack was shaped after performances in Quebec City and Montreal. The resulting film alternates between still photographs, charcoal sketches, drawn and engraved animation styles, while the music of Robert M. Lepage and René Lussier follows, anticipates, contradicts and complements Hébert's visual forms. More ambitious still is *La lettre d'amour*, a striking improvisational combination of dance, music, animation and writing. The story of a love letter, the film was created out of a series of performances in Montreal. As Hébert observes, "Each of us sought to extend the limits of our disciplines and converse over space to the other participants." While the text is read, the music plays, the dancer dances, and Hébert animates: "The animation was done live while the projector ran on a 36-second loop of 16mm film. During the improvisations, the loops slowly filled with images." For its sheer formal bravado and fidelity to the creative process, *La lettre d'amour* is a remarkable work.

Hébert's feature film debut, *La plante humaine*, is one of the most challenging and daring Canadian films of this decade. An anti-war allegory, it is also a penetrating film about perception, knowledge, memory, storytelling and the environment. Mixing live action, various animation styles, and elements of an improvised music score, this film is a monumental summation of the Hébert oeuvre to date.

Part narrative, part experimental film, *La plante humaine* revolves around Monsieur Michel, a retired librarian and widower with a passion for Leonardo da Vinci. Michel watches television, makes coffee,

shaves, observes life in the streets of his city, walks his dog and worries about the future. He has good reason. Televisions blare about the Gulf War, the streets grow dangerous with increasing poverty and crime, and the environment continues to be destroyed by an omnivorous consumer culture. Michel's life is rendered in animation and in live action (played by French actor Michel Lonsdale). While at the library, he begins reading an apocalyptic narrative from Burkina Faso about Jeddo Dewal, the mother of calamity sent to punish mankind for its misdeeds. The film then shifts back and forth from North America to Africa as the mythical journey of Bawam'nde, the saviour, is narrated and undertaken to keep the apocalypse at bay.

Set in the dangerous and disturbingly mediated context of the Gulf War, Hébert's ambitious feature is an intelligent examination of technological dependency, systems of false knowledge, and the oddly persistent necessity of narrative in human culture. It seems that in order to keep the world alive we must keep telling stories, like Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights*, as we struggle to disentangle ourselves from what has become a deceptive "cult of images." So, as Michel walks through his tense and threatening world, so too does Bawam'nde, telling stories to preserve humanity and to question the surface of things. Within this dense accumulation of images and events, Hébert offers parallels between their differing worlds. He also illuminates, through several breathtaking animated sequences of myriad styles, the fears and anxieties of both characters. Fiercely skeptical and refreshingly humanist, *La plante humaine* is formally freewheeling, thematically dizzying and visually overwhelming.

In the hands of a master such as Pierre Hébert, animation's ability to instantly dissolve the representational into the abstract, to leap associatively with ease, and to render simultaneously a flood of images, perceptions and perspectives, make it an unparalleled form of cinema. Its sheer kinetics and definition-defying flow confounds simplistic ways of seeing the world, offering a constant, disruptive presence in a world of controlled and ordered images. Pierre Hébert is arguably Canada's greatest living example of how aesthetically complex and politically relevant animation can be. ■