

Q U E

Quebec

Editor's note: Jean Pierre Lefebvre has been a major force in Quebec cinema since the early 1960s. In the winter of 1998, he led a seminar on Quebec independent cinema in the Fine Arts Program at Concordia University, Montreal. His talk was translated by Barbara Easto and previously appeared in *Post Script*, vol. 18, no. 2, published by the Department of Literature and Languages, Texas A&M University. Reprinted here with permission.

Independent

Cinema in

the 1990s

By Jean Pierre Lefebvre

If it had not been born "independent," Quebec cinema would not exist. And if it had not been born as "documentary," it would not be independent. For it was the documentary in all its forms that permitted our cinema, through the discovery and reinterpretation of both a real and an imaginary Quebec, to escape the trap of recognized film models. (Our "dramatic" cinema, deliberately Catholic and nationalistic, did in fact fall into this trap between the years of 1943 and 1954.) And if Quebec cinema was born both as documentary and independent, it was thanks to the National Film Board where, in the 1950s, the political and cultural "profit" of film was the only concern. (A perfect example of this phenomenon is Norman McLaren and his work.) But if this documentary cinema had not been Québécois, it would not have given birth to a dramatic cinema so clearly distinct from the dominant American culture (a domination that the cinema of English Canada, with rare exceptions, took much longer to escape). Finally, if these early artists and artisans working in documentary and dramatic film had not been self-taught but had been products of an academic environment, they would surely not have leaped with such sincerity, enthusiasm and naiveté into this marvellous adventure—the revelation cinematically of a culture deprived, until that moment, of images of itself. Nor would they have been content to let reality script their films, thereby giving them a form distinctly Québécois. So we can say that creation was, without a doubt, the driving force behind film production in Quebec, and that this creation was "independent" in a larger sense.

Jean Pierre Lefebvre



poetic

"In a larger sense" because this notion of creative independence varies substantially from one period to another, as from one country to another. As does our notion of independence itself when the growth of the global marketplace is breaking through the most entrenched cultural and ideological frontiers (consider, for example, American war toys mass-produced in The People's Republic of China). But if there are several definitions of independent cinema, we can generally agree in Canada as well as in Quebec that an independent film is one in which the director controls the creation absolutely and the production as much as possible. In my opinion, an independent film must also be the expression of a unique vision, subjective and personal, without commercial preoccupations. This definition would exclude American independent cinema, which seeks to break free of the powerful studios while pursuing a parallel commercial path. Quebec independent cinema, by contrast, seeks to distinguish itself from foreign models and to generally base itself on the expression of a personal and collective "poetry"—ideas, sentiments and sensations with the potential to create harmony between individuals and the society to which they belong, here and throughout the world.

But, as we all know, poetry doesn't sell. Influenced by the obsession with "economic reality" and the "bottom line" which has gripped the globe since the late 1970s, the provincial and federal institutions (specifically Telefilm Canada) on which our cinema depends financially almost 100 per cent, decided during the 1980s to put the accent on commercial viability. (The National Film Board saw its role diminish to the point that it stands essentially an empty shell in the 1990s.) We went on the hunt for "good" stories and "better" stars in order to make the "best" films and the "most" money. In short, we borrowed from Hollywood and advertising, the magical recipe—a strong concept in an irresistible package. And the experts, specialists and "professionals" took charge of each stage of script writing, production, direction, postproduction and distribution of our films.

Thus were the early days of Quebec independent cinema thrown in reverse. Production became the driving force behind creation—it was now necessary to sell a script before writing it and a film before shooting it. After the golden age of the 1970s, the anticipated amalgamation of the cinema of creation and the cinema of production did not occur. We entered instead an era of censorship of content by government institutions as well as by distributors and producers, which in turn spread a plague of self-censure, seriously threatening our *cinéma d'auteur*. Paradoxically, a film such as *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (Denys Arcand, 1986) put another nail in the coffin of *cinéma d'auteur* by becoming too exclusive a model of commercial viability, as did *Un Zoo la nuit* (Jean-Claude Lauzon), which borrowed the same model in 1987.

It is not surprising, then, that the cinema of creation has made its home once again in independent cinema, which as a general rule, obtains its start-up money from sources which demand that the director be an "auteur": the Canada Council, Le Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec, special programs at La Société des Entreprises Culturelles du Québec (SODEC), the National Film Board and film and video co-ops.



Oliver Asselin's *La Liberté d'une statue*: Asselin demonstrates that above representation stands meaning; above form stands sense.

As the French proverb says, *chasser le naturel, il revient au galop*. No, the leopard cannot change its spots. Despite the fog of the 1980s, certain independent films, though more rare than in the previous decade, succeeded in attaining that level of personal and collective poetry to which I refer: *La turlutte des années dures* (Richard Boutet and Pascal Gélinas, 1983), *Jacques et novembre* (Jean Beaudry and François Bouvier, 1984), *Celui qui voit les heures* (Pierre Goupil, 1985), *Oscar Thiffault* (Serge Giguère, 1987) and *Le Film de Justine* (Jeanne Crépault, 1989) among others.

During the 1990s, sunlight has broken through the cinematic fog even more convincingly. Is this a revolt against the progressive strangulation of independent creativity by the system of production and distribution, or are new and old directors making contact again with a heritage that, though recent, was somehow suppressed for a number of years? Or is it perhaps the vital need to reinvent our own special place on a planet that has become more and more banal under the rule of that tyrant, economic necessity? It is all of these at once, no doubt.

Oliver Asselin started the decade off with a bang with his first feature, *La Liberté d'une statue* (1990), a delicious philosophical



Jean Beaudry's and François Bouvier's *Jacques et Novembre*

fable which he shot himself in 16mm black-and-white. Having no experience as a cameraman, from time to time he took his eye off the viewfinder, allowing some light to hit the film stock. This caused random overexposures which not only accentuate the ironic humour of the fable but also challenge predominant "aesthetically correct" cinema. Asselin demonstrates, as we must again and again, that above representation stands meaning; above form stands sense.

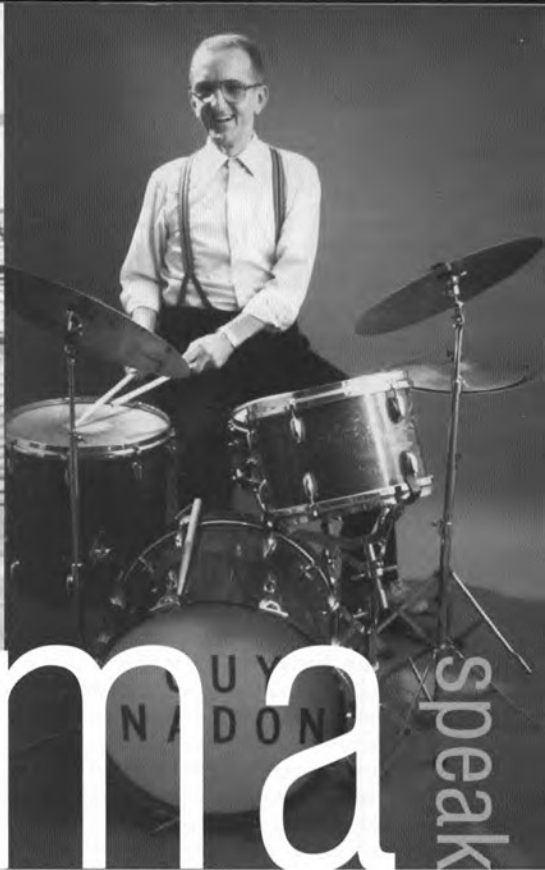
After coming to full maturity in 1987 with *Oscar Thiffault* (a grand pioneer of popular song in Quebec), the director Serge Giguère made, in 1991, the portrait *Le Roi du drum*, about Guy Nadon (another non-conformist such as Serge likes so well). Nadon is a genial "crazy" who, since early childhood, has never stopped drumming on any available surface. An exceptional drummer, he has played with a number of great jazz men during their visits to Montreal. The allegory is as obvious as the complicity between Giguère and his subject: Guy Nadon is Quebec; impassioned, inventive and resourceful, despite humble origins and marginalization. Nothing passes unnoticed before the eye of Giguère—reserved and generous, this eye lets people and places come to it, without dominating them. It seems to say "I am here for you," instead of the reverse. It is not surprising that this eye was also found behind the camera of *Jacques et novembre*, as well as two other major films, about which there is more below.

1992 was a banner year. *Le Voleur de caméra*, another fable like *La Liberté d'une statue*, but purely realistic, is the work of Claude Fortin, a nonfilmmaker militant about the rights of television viewers. When a man on the street (played by Fortin himself) is interviewed by a TV cameraman, he steals the camera. Like the filmmaker himself, the man gradually

learns, with humour and despair, both the technique and language of film—after which he comes up against the economic and political imperatives that control the worlds of the cinema and the media. *La Voleur de caméra* is a raw, biting film, always on the verge of despair, stubbornly completed by Fortin thanks to video Hi 8mm (later transferred to 16mm colour).

La Furmi et le volcan, is the second film by Céline Baril, a visual artist who fell by chance under the magical spell of cinema. After *Barcelone* (1989), a fascinating essay, she returned with a film both realistic and surrealistic, in which humour (once again) and seriousness melt together in the sensuous blacks, whites and greys such as we find in the films of the 1940s. Baril tells the strange story of a Chinese family from Hong Kong who try in vain to emigrate to Canada before the return of the city to China in 1997. The eldest daughter of the family corresponds with a Chinese volcanologist living in Iceland (to where the family may eventually move). Where did such a story originate, shot in Cantonese on sets in Montreal? Partly in footage Baril shot in Iceland, Hong Kong and China before the script was written. One thinks of Buñuel, Mizoguchi, Resnais and Vigo, but the film resembles its creator. (Baril made her first feature, *L'Absent* in 1997. Inspired by a photo album she bought at a Paris flea market, she invented a life for the people pictured there. As in her other films, she lets her characters wander freely from one continent and one culture to another.)

From the same year comes *Ceux qui ont le pas léger meurent sans laisser de traces*, a documentary d'auteur as beautiful as its title (Ed's note: which translates into English as *Those Who Walk Softly Die Without a Trace*). With the eye of Serge Giguère, the director Bernard Emond examines the life of a



Cinema

speaks in a language all its own.

Céline Baril's *La Furmi et le volcan*

Serge Giguère's *Le Roi du drum*

"nobody" in his 70s who has just died, a most ordinary inhabitant of a working-class neighbourhood in eastern Montreal. Not only does Emond reflect profoundly and soberly on identity, solitude and modern society, but he gives a sculptor the task of reinterpreting the life of his subject by means of a few ordinary objects the deceased has left behind. Through this creation, within the creation of the film itself, Emond transmits the poetry of life and of death. We are a million miles from the interviews and talking heads that normally constitute any kind of sociological "investigation" in our media, filling time on our television networks. In fact, the real subject of Emond's film is time itself.

In *Les Printemps incertains*, by Sylvain L'Espérance, we find ourselves in the southwest of Montreal, where industry once boomed but has moved on, obliging many inhabitants, specifically a large number of Irish, to follow suit. Here is another subject that could have inspired only bland reporting, but which the director handles with such delicacy that he lifts it to a higher level, moving beyond stark reality. There is one shot, for example, which could have come from the greatest of our dramatic or experimental films: in the background, an abandoned factory, Factory No. 1; in the extreme foreground a freight train passes, so close it appears almost abstract, for exactly one minute and 26 seconds. L'Espérance reminds us that cinema (and the image in general) does not only record—it also interprets and thus gives meaning, as I said earlier.

This is confirmed in a masterly fashion by another extraordinary documentary d'auteur, *Passage sous les paupières* (1995) by Lucie Lambert. Shot in the region of the upper North Shore of the St. Lawrence, again with Serge Giguère as cameraman, the film introduces three women from dif-

ferent generations and wanders freely and affectionately with them through their interior and exterior landscapes—so freely we are no longer sure who has influenced whom. The lives of these women flow like the St. Lawrence itself, suffering like its mountains, changing like its seasons. Rarely, to my knowledge, have we felt so organically the profound link between nature and those who inhabit it. The film even allows us to imagine how the land must have been before the arrival of Europeans. It also echoes *Ceux qui ont le pas léger*; in which Bernard Emond makes clear that it is easier for one to get lost in a city, because of the solitude of each, than on the empty tundra, because of the solidarity of all.

I could also speak of *A Bullet in the Head* (Attila Bertalan, 1990), *Nuits d'Afrique* (Catherine Martin, 1990), *Aube urbaine* (Janine Gagné, 1994), *Un film de cinéastes* (collectif, 1995), *9, Saint-Augustin* (Serge Giguère, 1995), *Anna à la lettre C* (Joe Balass, 1997) and the works of Robert Morin, a first-rate video artist and filmmaker. I do not wish to make an exhaustive study of independent cinema here, nor will I discuss my own works, or works I have not seen. But it is undeniable that Quebec independent cinema in the 1990s is rebuilding, piece by piece, a strong cinema, out of one that was almost destroyed by the empty dream of a Québécois or Canadian "Hollywood."

So is our *cinéma d'auteur* really under threat? Yes, when one considers what has become of our features destined for the big screen and television. No, when one looks in the right direction, that of independent cinema of different genres, where we can discern that cinema still speaks eloquently, and Quebec cinema speaks in a language all its own. •