PIERRE HÉBERT

Animation without Borders

By Chris Gehman

Filmmaker, performer, visual artist and writer, Pierre Hébert is acutely aware of the anomalous position he occupies in the world of animation. His work spans the distance between the most primitive forms of representation and the most sophisticated technology and crosses many media, from printmaking and photography to writing and film. His animated films are unusually searching, conceptually and formally complex, while his unique methods of production are far removed from those employed by industrial and art animators alike. He may be unique in all of animation in the crucial role that live performance has played in his work. Many of his films began as live–animation performances and have been completed by structuring, recombining and adding to the results of these improvised film events. He has worked closely with musicians and dancers and has toured as a performer. In short, his work is an uneasy companion to both the commercial fare and the "fine animation" that characterize most of the field.

Although Hébert has been recognized by key international venues – including a 1997 retrospective at the prestigious Festival international du film d'animation in Annecy, France – he remains little known outside of Quebec, a situation aggravated by the fact that many of his films have never been made available in English–language versions. And, like all animators, his work is largely ignored by the world of "serious" cinema. As Hébert puts it, "I was in an uneasy situation because I never recognized a difference between animation and cinema. The cinematic tradition I admired refused animation, excluded it. I have lived through this contradiction until very recently."

Born in Montreal in 1944, Hébert studied anthropology at the Université de Montréal in the early 1960s. He had already developed an interest in art and cinema. After hearing about the cameraless animated films of Norman McLaren, he undertook his own experiments by scratching images on the emulsion of 8mm film, an act that has continued to inform his practice. He was part of the exciting growth of Quebec cinema in the early 1960s and has been active in organizations such as Cinémathèque québécoise. Hébert went to work for the NFB's animation unit in 1965 and completed *Opus 3* and *Op Hop – Hop Op*, his first films for the Board, in 1966. His early films were primarily camera-

By the early 1970s, Hébert moved away from abstract and perceptual filmmaking to create works with specific subjects, often expressing critical social and political themes. *Entre chiens et loup* (1978) explored the effects of unemployment on the individual and the relationship of unemployment to technological change. This witty, compassionate and understated political film combined a text by Bertolt Brecht, which is both sung and presented in scratched titles, with live–action footage and different styles of animation. *Souvenirs de guerre* (1982) connected the production of war materials with the lives of the workers who make them, and the effects of their final use.

La Plante humaine (1996)

less and used abstract shapes, often on screen for only a single frame in combination with percussive soundtracks. They played with visual and rhythmic perception, and with *Autour de la perception* (1968), he began experimenting with computer animation, again emphasizing non–representational, cyclically repeating images. In these early films, several of the elements that characterize his work are evident: the rough, jagged–incised image; the repetition and variation of elements within the work – what Hébert now refers to as "microcycles," and the strong, complicated sense of music and sound / image relations.

Where many animators tend to treat subjects like war, greed and family in abstract, allegorical terms, falling back on broad, cynical truisms about human nature, Hébert situates his subjects with great care. The unemployed man who rides a Voyageur bus in *Entre chiens et loup* may share the plight of unemployed people around the world, but he is indisputably an unemployed Québécois in Canada's technologically shifting capitalist society. The allegorical dimension of Brecht's verse, which uses dog and wolf characters to portray the rapacious behaviour of individuals under a capitalist regime, is both expanded and concretized by Hébert's

Left and right: *La Plante humaine*.

treatment, with its multiple–levelled montage of scratch animation, cut–out animation and documentary footage. *Souvenirs de guerre* connects the peaceful family life of a weapons–industry worker with the cycle of war production in which he participates, and the possibility of war that threatens to sweep away the children of the next generation. The film ends with a blunt image of a Canadian armed forces recruiting billboard advertisement.

As he began to collaborate more regularly with musicians such as René Lussier, Robert M. Lepage, Jean Derome, Fred Frith and Bob Ostertag, and with dancers such as Louise Bédard and Rosalind Newman, Hébert's films increasingly used material created during performances as the principal element in the finished films' structures. During the 1980s, the emphasis of Hébert's work shifted again away from social subjects to art itself, particularly in *Ô Picasso* (1985) and *Adieu bipède* (1987), homages to Picasso and Henri Michaux respectively. This series of performance–based films culminated in the Canada/France co–production *La Plante humaine* (1996), a feature–length work that follows the daily routine and the inner life of a retired librarian at the time of the beginning of the Gulf War. Following this, Hébert continued to work at the NFB for a few years as a producer on such films as Michèle Cournoyer's powerful *Le Chapeau* (2000). He has now left the Board but continues his work as an independent artist, writer and filmmaker. Recently, in collaboration with musician and composer Bob Ostertag, Hébert has begun to work live with digital sound and image systems. Hébert's and Ostertag's improvised sound/image performance *Between Science and Garbage* premiered at Toronto's Images Festival of Independent Film and Video last April.

La Plante humaine stands as a summation of Hébert's film work to date. It has a central character, a retired librarian named Michel, who is represented mainly in scratch animation, but also in some sections by a live actor (Michel Lonsdale). The film, which has no real story or intrigue, follows the flow of Michel's life and thoughts over the course of a few days, and addresses a fundamental truth of our age that few works of art have adequately explored: the radical separation between what we *know*, as members of a densely populated, media–saturated culture, and what we actually *do* on a daily basis. Michel's mind is filled with ideas and information. He studies the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci (a recurring Hébert reference) and reads from a book of myths and legends from different cultures. On television he sees coverage of the Gulf War alongside a religious scholar and a documentary on flamenco dancing (with footage from Cynthia Scott's *Flamenco at 5:15*). In his immediate surroundings, he sees an old, homeless woman who talks to herself, a group of shiftless teenage punks, his former workplace (the local library) and the grocery store. At home, he keeps three animals, each a representative of one of the mythic elements: a dog (earth), a bird (air) and a fish (water). The fourth element, fire, is associated with humans in the many images of fire that recur throughout the film.

La Plante humaine aspires to present an index of the many levels on which an individual exists. Firmly grounded in the realities of an ordinary person's daily life, it also acknowledges the realms of memory and anticipation, fantasy and dream, information and myth, which occupy us throughout our lives. These various levels of experience are reflected in the film's multiple representational strategies. Often animated images are composited with live–action footage within a shot. On occasion, Michel's physical world gives way entirely to a series of images that arise by association in his mind, as when a visit to his wife's grave brings forth images of her coffin tumbling through the void, turning on its side to disgorge leaves of paper. Later, when this image recurs, the papers have been invested with new meaning by intervening events. They refer not only to family photographs but also to the sheets of paper burned by the homeless woman on a cold night. On other occasions, Michel's shuffling walk through the city streets is paralleled with the striding gait of an African mythical figure whose story is told in voice–over from Michel's book of myths, and in live–action segments shot in Burkina Faso.

In its near–Joycean aspirations, *La Plante humaine* is only partly successful. Although the multiple styles of representation in the film are one of its key structuring principles, the acted segments are sometimes a weak link, especially those involving the main character. Paradoxically, the librarian comes alive in his animated form. Although Hébert's style is by no means emotionally expressive, in the acted segments we see only an actor playing a character whose reality we have come to understand through his animated image. Still, this extremely ambitious and original film is fascinating, provocative, disquieting and worth seeking out. It has not been sufficiently recognized for the

Above: *Souvenirs de guerre* (1982)

scale of its achievement in confronting the drastic schisms at the heart of everyday life in technological societies.

As a performer, Hébert has come up with a very demanding system for creating scratch animation live by running a long loop of 16mm black leader through a projector. The loop is long enough that, as it advances through the projector, Hébert can gather some slack, quickly engrave a few quick lines into several consecutive frames, then let the film go, gather up another section and so on. As the performance continues, Hébert adds to each section of animation, so that the projection becomes more complex and varied over the duration of the show. Anyone witnessing such a performance will recognize what Hébert means when he speaks of "microcycles." Each discrete section of animation is brief and each repeats in a regular cycle. But each has also undergone alterations and additions every time it appears. What begins as a series of gestural marks – almost arbitrary – gradually takes on the character of ideograms and elusive representational figures within an increasingly dense temporal rhythmic pattern that brings to mind the general shape of biological evolution or the development of thinking. In performance, Hébert's work moves into similar territory to the hand–carved and painted films of the great experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, whose work represents an attempt to present what Brakhage calls "moving visual thinking," although in most other respects their work is dissimilar.

The act of scratching on film, and even more specifically the act of scratching on film while the film is moving through the projector, is at the centre of Hébert's art. Speaking at the Images Festival, Hébert explained why his work in film has evolved to this point. "What I like in scratching on film is its deep anachronical character. It's a technique where there is a sort of historical short circuit. When you decide to disregard the photochemical technology of film you take a very naive stance, saying 'well, this is supposed to bear an image, so I will scratch an image on it, using a gesture that is as old as humanity.' I understood that there was in this a critical or remote stance, and it could be quite provocative, a statement about the historicity of technology." During a performance, Hébert sits at a table frantically incising his expressive, jagged marks into the emulsion of a narrow strip of film, reflecting the situation of every worker who has ever had to keep up with the pace of a machine. The mechanical technology of a movie

projector, after all, is not much different from that of a sewing machine. Hébert questions the humanity of the entire situation through the "primitive" figures he engraves; his gestures become the cry of a complex creature harnessed to the cruelly simple and repetitive rhythms demanded by his own technological civilization.

This reflective process also extends to the shifts throughout Hérbert's career, and parallels the adjustments all workers are forced to make as technological development changes the nature of their work. Minor changes in the process of filmmaking have had a profound impact on his working method. He describes, for example, the drastic adjustments he had to make when the NFB's laboratory stopped producing its own double–perforated black leader. Casting around for a suitable replacement, he found that he had to shift to a colour stock rather than the black and white he had been using. This necessitated an alteration in his whole physical stance in attacking the film, as the softer colour emulsion produced a very different kind of line from the harder, more jagged markings of the black and white. And now he includes digital systems in the range of performance technologies, capturing brief snippets of animation live with a video camera, saving them on a computer, and repeating and recombining them in a myriad of cyclical variations.

An animator whose work closely relates to literature and the performing arts, Pierre Hébert is sure to bring a unique perspective to the form as long as he continues to work. One can only hope that critics and audiences in the rest of Canada will begin to recognize the depth and value of his contribution to cinema, and his perspective on the distinctions between film and "new media," which is informed by a historical perspective on technology. "The whole notion of new media is not something I accept," he says. "Actually, we have been in the era of new media since the appearance of photography, and the problems it poses to the artist have not changed. Of course, many things are different with digital technology, but I don't think there is such a thing as a digital revolution. Instead, it forces the artist to be a reflection of what is probably the most important thing for *everybody* in modern life, which is living through all the effects of technology. The deepest and most important thing is to create a sort of performance of experience of technology"

TAKE ONE