

# ANYBODY MAKING SHORTS THESE DAYS?

by Guy L. Coté

Guy L. Coté, long associated with the National Film Board, formed La Cinémathèque canadienne in 1963, is associate author of several special reports to the government on the motion picture industry, and among other seminal activities, is recognized as one of Canada's leading private collectors of experimental and underground films. He has directed many award-winning documentaries for the NFB and has recently produced a number of features there.

In 1962, a group of Université de Montréal students decided to try their hand at feature filmmaking. Financed by the students' association and with the assistance of NFBers Michel Brault, Gilles Groulx and Marcel Carrière, the group produced the 80-minute *Seul ou avec d'autres* which ran a surprising eight weeks in a St Catherine's Street theatre and subsequently in numerous French-Canadian colleges and universities. The film was directed by Denis Arcand and Denys Héroux, both of whom have since become professional filmmakers. Their story is symbolic of the development of the new Quebec cinema: Arcand turned to making documentaries for the NFB while Héroux stuck to private industry and is now directing commercial features.

Arcand's last film is *On est au coton*, a feature-length socially-committed scrutiny of the textile industry, ranging from the Duplessis days of bloody trade union struggle to the recent economic ills brought about by cheap

imports and resulting in mill closures and unemployment. Because of its length, this hard-hitting documentary will find most of its use in non-commercial situations and study groups, where it is likely to arouse controversy.

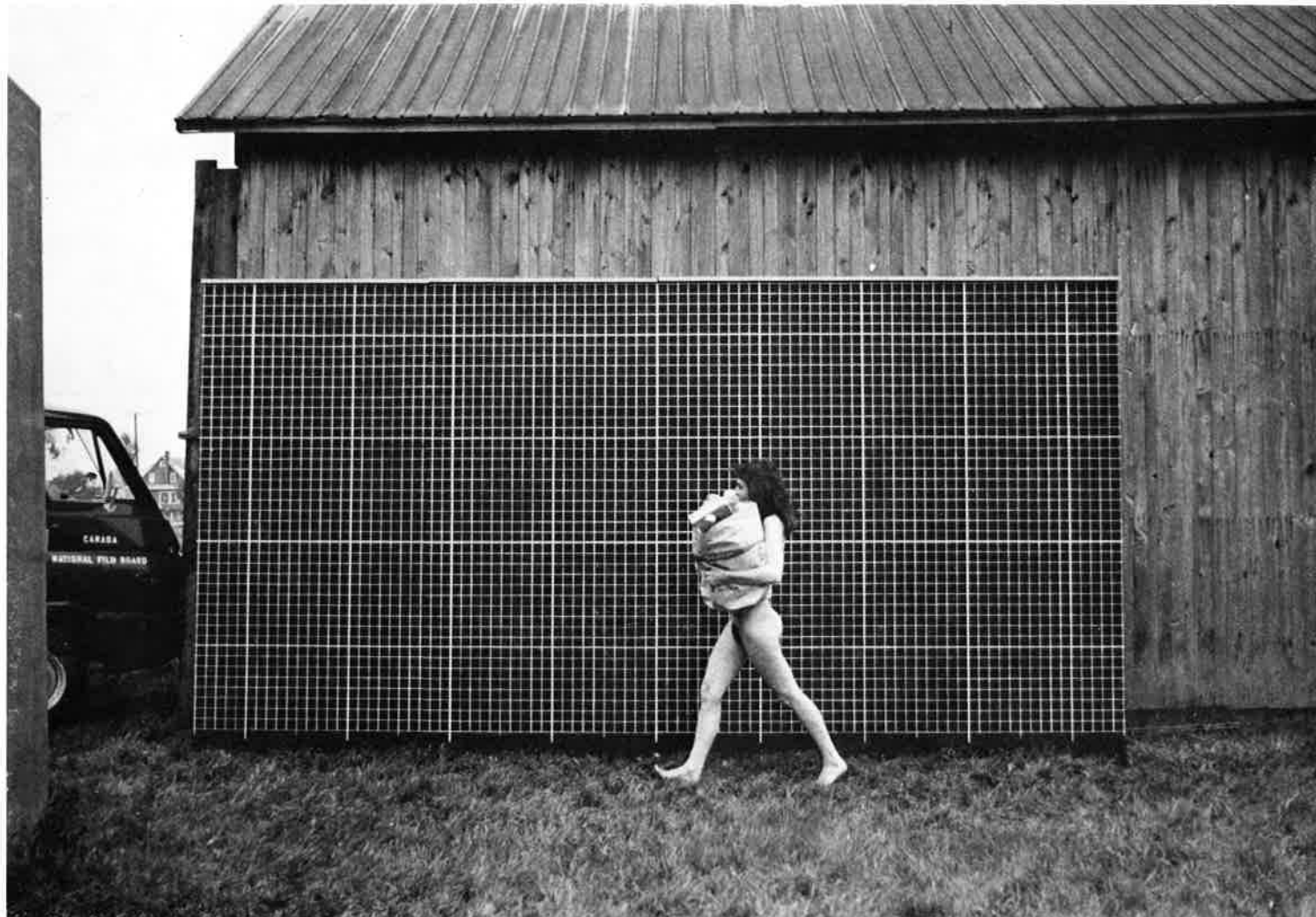
Héroux's new feature, *L'Initiation*, on the other hand, is a colour sexploitation film that is packing record-breaking crowds into the Parisien Theatre to ogle at no less than four pairs of made-in-Quebec bare bosoms in a Sauna, plus much hygienic-looking love-making on the clean bedsheets of Montreal's Hotel Bonaventure. Critics said that Héroux's first commercial success, *Valérie*, had at last "deshabillé la petite québécoise." *L'Initiation* leaves no doubt about what happens to her subsequently: its formula resembles that of most German, Danish or Swedish sex-dramas of recent years, with its handsome photography, explicit fornicating and wholesome, easy-to-follow psychology ("sex is meaning-

less without spiritual love, isn't it?" says one ingénue as she climbs into bed with a married man twice her age.)

Both *On est au coton* and *L'Initiation* could not have been made without federal government funds (NFB for the first, CFDC for the second), a healthy sign that Monsieur Pelletier's right hand wants to make up for what his left hand isn't doing (and vice-versa). These recent productions are but two of no less than *twenty-one* feature-length French-language films that were shot in 1969, the majority of which are hoping for (but may not get) theatrical release. When *L'Initiation* ends its run at the Parisien, it will be followed by *Red*, another CFDC-financed feature directed by Gilles Carles at Onyx Films.

Gilles Carles is an ex-CBC designer with a sense of humour who made his first feature at

From Gilles Groulx' *Entre tu et vous*.





From Jean-Pierre  
Lefebvre's *Le  
Révolutionnaire*.



From Raymond Gar-  
ceau's *Le grand Rock*.



the NFB (*Le monde heureux de Léopold Z*, a respectable commercial success which played in most theatrical locations in Quebec) and went on to private industry where he made, in his spare time, *Le viol d'une jeune fille douce* (also a moderate commercial success). Carles' films so far have been strongly influenced by his documentary experience at the NFB, a characteristic he shares with many directors of his generation such as Michel Brault (*Entre la mer et l'eau douce*), Gilles Groulx, Raymond Garceau, Marcel Carrière and Arthur Lamothe.

Many of the new features in current production are the result of what appears to be an attempt both by the CFDC and the NFB to develop new talent without forcing the filmmakers to go through the apprenticeship of documentary. Prior to this, standard procedure had been for documentary directors at the NFB to over-script and overshoot previously approved half-hour projects and face the administrators with a *fait accompli*, i.e., a feature film done on the sly. Working in the private sector, on the other hand, usually meant having to film on weekends with borrowed equipment, an unpaid crew and an amateur cast in so-called "co-operative" ventures. Neither situation, of course, was satisfactory and certainly not conducive to fully developing the creative potential of the filmmakers concerned.

At the NFB, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, as Head of the Fiction Film Studio, inaugurated last year a policy of producing a number of "premières oeuvres," i.e., allowing young directors with little or no previous experience to write and direct their own low-budget feature with the professional assistance of NFB technicians. So far, Jean Chabot, André Thériage, Yvon Patry and Michel Audy — all non-NFBers — have shot such films at the Board. At the time of writing, these films are still at the test-print stage and have yet to be released. In the private sector, such filmmakers as André Forcier and Jean Faucher have also shot low budget features, sometimes with the help of modest grants from the CFDC. However, not even an incurable optimist would predict that all these films will eventually be exhibited in first-run commercial theatres: some films will be of a frankly experimental nature while others (let's face it) may reveal that their directors had more courage and initiative than true creative talent. This growing library of non-commercial features will doubtless find some outlet among cine-clubs and in "New Cinema" festivals abroad. Few may eventually be subtitled in English.

Lefebvre himself, as a director, is continuing to make his own highly personal experimental features, at the rate of one or two a year. Two features he made earlier for the NFB, *Mon ami Pierrette* and *Jusqu'au coeur*, were released in 1969 as well as *La chambre blanche*, made in the private sector with CFDC assistance. Of these, only the first (a simple romantic tale of teenagers caught in the first pangs of puppy-love) is exempt from the highly poetic but often obscure construction and symbolism which characterizes much of Lefebvre's work. *Jusqu'au coeur*, though it benefits from the participation of Robert Charlebois (whose part in the film doesn't call for him to sing) is so allegorical and



From Michel Brault's *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* with Claude Gauthier and Genevieve Bujold.

Claude Jutra (left) and Victor Désy in Jutra's *À tout prendre*.



From Arthur Lamothe's *Poussière sur la Ville*.

transposed that its meaning has escaped many ordinary spectators: disappointed and often bored, they can't recognize the ebullient Charlebois they know on the stage. As to *La chambre blanche*, a philosophic poem on isolation and alienation as seen through the life of a couple, it was a total box-office failure in Montreal, though some critics have hailed it as Lefebvre's most personal, poetic and intimate film. Undaunted, and doubtless influenced by the wave of sex-films currently on show, Lefebvre has now directed what he calls a "non-erotic nude" aptly titled *Un succès commercial* or *Q-bec My Love* (to be pronounced *à la Française*). It has just been released in movie houses catering to the popular east-end sector of Montreal.

Other established filmmakers have also recently completed features at the NFB. Gilles Groulx's *Où êtes-vous donc?*, a stylish examination of the world of popular music and its relationship to social engagement and (again) alienation, recently received limited theatrical release. Soon to follow is Groulx's newest feature, *Entre tu et vous*, a seven-part essay on the processes of seduction. Claude Jutra has just finished *Wow*, a mixture of documentary and fantasy which examines the problems of teenagers in the context of the new drug scene and the desire to escape from childhood. Marcel Carrière's first feature, *Saint-Denis*, is concerned with the battle of 1837 and its meaning in the contemporary Quebec scene. Finally, Raymond Garceau is completing *Vive la France*, a comedy about a French teacher in a typical small French-Canadian town. Garceau's previous feature, *Le grand Rock*, a drama about a trapper-turned-gangster, has enjoyed notable commercial popularity throughout Quebec, in spite of its lack of sophistication and the simplicity of its story and character development.

All the above films use fiction to a considerable extent (some have completely professional casts). Other features produced during the year are of a more resolutely documentary character, such as the films of Pierre Perrault, whose *Pour la suite du monde* (*Moontrap*, co-directed with Michel Brault) is already something of a classic. In 1969, Perrault's newest two-hour cinéma-direct film, *Les voitures d'eau*, was shown on television and is now in release to ciné-clubs and other similar groups. Using the techniques of direct 16mm sound shooting in real situations, Perrault succeeds in *Les voitures d'eau* in capturing something of the life and aspirations of the *goëlette* captains that ply the local shipping trade along the St Lawrence River. Perrault's films are notable for the spontaneity with which the real characters express themselves and for the careful, often complex, editing of the tens of thousands of feet of film he shoots. His newest production (co-directed with Michel Brault and due for release later in the year) centers around the activities of Acadian students at the French-speaking Université de Moncton. He is also at work on a feature-documentary which will examine the notion of "le pays" ("the country") in poetic, affective, social and political terms.

Other filmmakers have turned to the feature film as a means of social animation. Using techniques developed in the *Challenge for Change* (*Société Nouvelle*) programmes, both Fernand Dansereau and Léonard Forest have

participated in experiments by which citizens write and design their own fictional films, based on their real-life experiences, as a means of self-expression and self-revelation. The position of the filmmaker in this case is close to that of the animator in a session of group dynamics: the making of the film at all stages is subject to the collective decisions of the participants. A scene may be written by one citizen but it must be agreed to by all before it is shot under the technical supervision of the director. The cutting copy is not only commented upon but also modified by collective agreement. Even the title of the film must be the result of a consensus.

Using these techniques places the filmmaker in a new relationship with his participants. The "actors" draw so heavily on their real-life experiences that some scenes take on poignant authenticity as the demarcation

line between reality and make-believe becomes blurred. Fernand Dansereau's highly successful two-hour *Tout l'temps, Tout l'temps, Tout l'temps* is just now in release on Radio-Canada, while Forest's film is still at the editing stage.

There is no doubt that much of Quebec feature filmmaking now tends to overshadow the traditional short documentary on which so much of Canadian prestige abroad has been based. It is obvious that most imaginative and creative directors do not wish to remain in the short film field and that over the next five years one will increasingly turn to an examination of features as a measure of the creative pulse of Quebec filmmaking. Whether this creativity will also find international recognition and distribution remains the most important challenge now facing the Quebec cinéastes.



From Fernand Dansereau's *Tout l'temps, Tout l'temps, Tout l'temps*.



From Claude Jutra's *Wow*.