

# Safety in numbers?

*The 1988 Canadian student film festival*

BY LOUISE JOHNSON

**A**s Montreal hosted the 19th Concordia... I mean Canadian Student film festival, the issue of regional composition became quite obvious once again. Very simply, the overwhelming presence of Montreal's Concordia University in both the showcase (26 out of 67 films) and among the award-winners (five out of six of the top awards) is quite disproportionate in light of the fact that films from 13 schools were selected for the screenings. It is frankly disappointing that in a festival that is supposed to be a national showcase, 40 per cent of the films come from one school and almost one half of the films come from Montreal.

The festival's administration cannot be faulted for this situation since they assured me that every filmmaking school or art institution in Canada was informed of the festival's existence, regulations and deadlines for entry.

They also informed me that Concordia submits a significantly higher number of films than any other school. One of the jurors confirmed this and added that Concordia's representation was never an issue in their deliberations. The irony in this situation is that

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*Nivis* by Simon Goulet

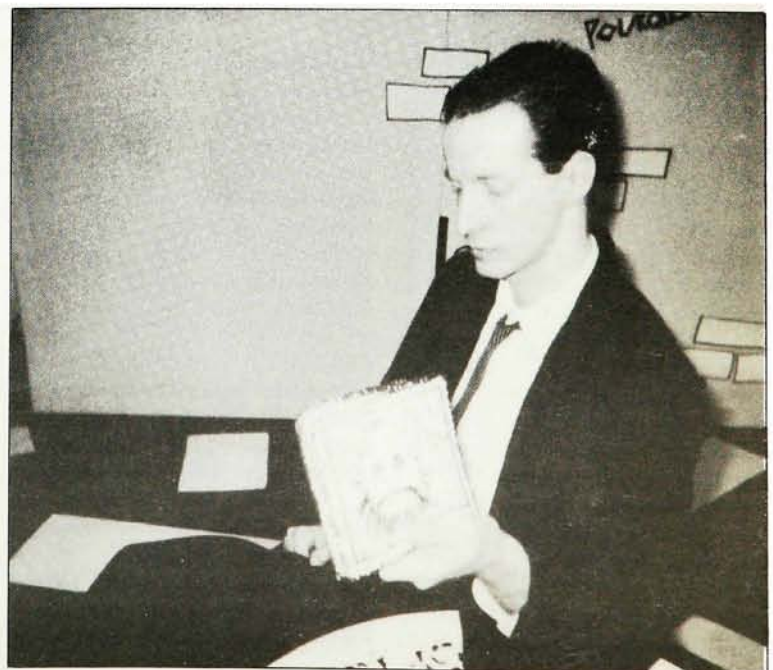
there should actually be more Concordia films in the festival in view of the fact that about 200 films are made there each year. I find most Concordia students apathetic towards the festival. Almost all Concordia students attend the Year End Screenings where they see the work of their peers and, perhaps more importantly, their peers see their work. So, rather than attending screenings of films that they have already seen, many film students prefer to see professional films at the Montreal World Film Festival, which runs concurrently at the same venue.

The politics of regional representation was probably the most controversial element of the festival. In terms of content there was not much that would qualify as extreme in connection with any contentious issue and I didn't perceive anything to be in excessively bad taste. There was also very little that could be considered daring in terms of technique. I expected to see more challenging films since students don't face as many obstacles (e.g. marketability, approval of funds, public censure etc.) as professional filmmakers. On the whole, however, the films were perilously safe. There was only one film where a significant portion of the audience walked out and they were motivated more by boredom than outrage.

*Tracks* by Mary Daniels allows us to experience



From *Crépuscule* by Pierre Sylvestre



*Café Pliize* by Luc Barcelo

a long train trip firsthand. The sounds we hear are train noises and long-winded discussions of fellow travellers. The only images we see are those outside of the windows of the train – if we're lucky. This film includes hundreds of feet of black leader. The most obnoxious traveller in the film is talking during these minutes verging on days and we experience a sublimely intolerable ordeal. It is at this point where the film becomes quite comical – some people in the audience actually found it screamingly hilarious.

Audience reactions to other films weren't quite as entertaining but there were some very strong films especially in the experimental category. *Sales Images* by Michel de Gagné won a merit award with its comment on a darker side of life. This film is a dizzying collage of images and it is quite skillfully put together with optical effects, superimpositions etc.

A film which was much calmer but no less stimulating was Elise de Blois' *Interface*, a black-and-white series of still portraits cross-dissolving into one another. The allure of these portraits is in the idea that they are still but they were created through movement; the portraits are of faces pressed against a Xerox copier and some of them are contorted through movement during the photographic process. The last image in the film is very cubist – the head was rolled during the photocopy process so that the forehead and part of the face and the mouth and chin is a profile of one side of the face, while the mouth and chin is a three-quarter view of the other side of the face. The faces look elastic and quite fabricated as they are pressed up against the picture plane. This film really brings out the potential of the photocopier as an art tool.

Another film that deals with the surface of the picture plane is *Store Window Broken*, by Alexander Bak and Paul Kettner. This two-minute film is a single three to four-second shot of a black man throwing a rock at a store window. This shot is looped for the entire duration of the film. The sound (short descriptions of South Africa, news reports, etc.) is also looped but the tracks become incomprehensible as they are progressively overlaid. The picture degenerates in a way that makes the image look cracked and scratched almost like a shattered window. We are left with the impression that an act of violent defiance by a black person in South Africa will result in his/her own destruction. This film won the top award in the experimental category and the two Queen's University filmmakers also won an award for a documentary on South Africa called *Not Not*. The film makes a statement similar to that of *Store Window Broken* but it does so with images of South Africa and first-person accounts of life there.

Both films are powerful but *Store Window Broken* seems to stay with me. The hypnotic effect of the film cuts deeper than the content of the verbal accounts in *Not Not*.

**Norman McLaren Award** (\$1,000 offered by the National Film Board):

*Across The Street* by Arto Paragamian (Concordia University, Montreal)

**Best Fiction film:**

Awarded ex-aequo to:  
*All In Passing* by Rick Ash (University of Regina, Saskatchewan) and:

*Comme Hier Matin* by André Turpin (Concordia University, Montreal)

**Best Experimental film:**

*Store Window Broken* by Alexander Bak, Paul Kettner (Queen's University, Kingston)

## Award-winners

**Best Documentary film:**

Awarded ex-aequo to:  
*Nivis* by Simon Goulet (Concordia University, Montreal)

and:

*Not Not* by Alexander Bak, Paul Kettner, Gerald MacKenzie (Queen's University, Kingston)

**Best Animation film:**

*Docteur Inc.* by Christian L'Écuyer (Concordia University, Montreal)

The members of the Jury gave special mentions to the following films:

**Fiction category:**

*Valley Of The Moon* by William E. Hornecker (Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver)

**Experimental category:**

*Sales Images* by Remi Beausoleil, Michel DeGagné, Michel Gélinas (Université de Montréal)

and:

*Waving* by Anne-Marie Fleming (Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver)

**Animation Category:**

*Low Blow* by Denise Tremblay (Concordia University, Montreal)

## The Arto of film

In just over one year, Arto Paragamian, 23, has won the Grand Prix at the Canadian Student Film festival twice and been awarded the Mel Hoppenheim prize as the outstanding graduating student in film production at Montreal's Concordia University. As well, *Pay Television in France* has bought both of his award-winning student films, *A Fish Story* and *Across the Street*. He is currently working on a Masters degree in Film Production at Concordia.

**Cinema Canada:** What got you into filmmaking?

**Arto Paragamian:** Well, first I was an illustrator – graphic design, advertising and all that, and I hated it. Not a way to express oneself. So I took up narrative filmmaking which is an even worse way to express oneself – there are a lot of compromises: too many people, too much money...

**Cinema Canada:** So why not experimental or documentary?

**Arto Paragamian:** Well, I always plan to do what I want to, no matter what it is – I'm going to fight for it. Why not Experimental? I will do Experimental – I already have on Super-8. I like Experimental... not all Experimental – I think there's a lot of bad stuff around, but I'm looking forward to doing what people are calling Experimental Narrative.

**Cinema Canada:** You're a director, I know you've done some acting and you write your own scripts. Do you expect that to continue?

**Arto Paragamian:** Yes. I want to keep it as close as possible to total creative control.

**Cinema Canada:** You also do all your own editing – it seems to me that you like editing.

**Arto Paragamian:** Yes. No. Yes. No... I have a love-hate relationship with editing. It's difficult when you're the director. It's very hard to make cuts because what's good for you is not necessarily good for everyone else.

**Cinema Canada:** You tend to draw heavily on an immigrant theme. Do you expect that to continue as well?

**Arto Paragamian:** Yes, but I expect it to change a little bit. It's going to become less like an immigrant and more like someone who doesn't understand his environment and sees it in an instinctive way. The immigrant theme is a good parallel. Also, the character and culture that comes from other places is very interesting to me – something that's counter-point to its environment. It usually makes very interesting comedy.

**Cinema Canada:** There's a scene in *Across the Street* where two characters are playing backgammon and one character keeps grabbing the dice off the board before the other player has finished his turn. He then proceeds to shake it for the entire turn. Do you see this as an example of what you're talking about?

**Arto Paragamian:** No. That's more of a character joke. The thing with the signs is a better example. A little boy from a recently landed immigrant family is wandering around lost in a big city and every time he comes to a traffic sign with an arrow in it, he goes in the direction that it points. He gives up finally when he comes to a sign with an arrow that points in two opposite directions. The gap there is that we know how to read those symbols, but he has to improvise with anything he can find to get out of his situation and he reads the signs out of context.

**Cinema Canada:** Characters seem very important to you.

**Arto Paragamian:** Yeah. In the last film everybody was talking about how good the characterization was. I thought it was one of the strong points. I also like concentrating on purely visual – I use human figures as a compositional device. I especially like visual comedy, again, like the road signs.



PHOTO: GEORGE CLARKE

**Arto Paragamian**

**Cinema Canada:** Why do you prefer black and white?

**Arto Paragamian:** Why? Well, I write the script and I picture it and I see it all in black and white. It's as simple as that.

**Cinema Canada:** I only like black and white when it's not done by rock stars trying to be profound.

**Arto Paragamian:** Oh God yeah. It's trendy now... I just don't see a need for color. Black and white is the only way I've ever made films... I've shot in color before but I don't like color on film, especially on 16mm shot on questionable equipment. If I ever made a color film, I would want to paint everything on the set. You can't control it on film.

**Cinema Canada:** Where do you expect to fit in, in terms of markets?

**Arto Paragamian:** My most marketable asset is probably my sense of comedy. I really don't know. I don't like films whose draw is technological and whose strength is slick formal technique. I like more familiar things – families, characters, kids. What is it with all these robots? What's wrong with focusing on people?

The top prize in documentary went to a film which was more experimental than straight documentary. Simon Goulet's *Nivis* is, very simply, about snow. He uses many different effects from optical printing to slow motion (6400 frames per second) in his rendering of every aspect of snow. A lot of attention is given to the imagery, but the strength of the film is in the way that the imagery works with the sound. The soundtrack has a whole rhythm and ambience that fits the many ways of perceiving snow - from lightly falling snowflakes in slow motion, to wild swirling snowstorms.

On the whole, the documentaries were impressive and quite diverse in treatment and subject matter. We saw a light hearted film about kids (*Symphony in A, B, C* by Judith Horrell and Manon Boivin), a biography (*Gilles Villeneuve* by Paul Buisson), a cinematographic film on nature (*Les Gambadeurs* by Benoit Jacob) and a film about a mentally handicapped man (*Norman* by Dale Hildebrand).

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the festival was the lack of animation. Of the 68 films screened, only five were animated. What little animation there was, however, was well received by the audience. Christian L'Ecuyer's *Docteur Inc.*, a claymation film about cashing in on health care, won the top prize. In this film a doctor's office sets the stage for a subtle but sardonic portrayal of the medical profession and its clientele. A visit to the doctor by a deathly ill patient is made to look more like a business transaction than an effort towards seeing a patient to a healthy recovery. The character design is perfect - the patient is a pale, emaciated character with dull green rings around his eyes and the doctor's eyes are completely white. L'Ecuyer's flair for details like these make this film particularly sharp. There were spots where the editing could have been tighter, but the 'show more than tell' approach helped give this film an authenticity which is haunting in the way that it may parallel our own experiences.

Far less subtle was Denise Tremblay's *Low Blow* in which a male's phallus grows huge and takes off from his body like a rocketship. This satire on male ego becomes more cerebral after this opening, with sequences based on Greek mythology and T. S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland*. The film doesn't work because, as a whole, it was quite disjointed and sections of it were badly animated. Nonetheless, it won a merit award.

Pierre Sylvestre's *Crépuscule*, about a little boy's nightmare, was technically wonderful with strong images and animation. The images - swinging axes, a teddy-bear hanging from a noose, shadowy psycho killers - build up suspensefully to the point where the boy wakes up and the dream or reality pitch is made, leaving us with an ambiguous ending. *Crépuscule* was the most finished of the animated films and the audience response to it was thunderous. It certainly deserved at least a mention by the jury, but perhaps the dream or

reality concept is getting a little tired.

Something that the festival had quite enough of was badly acted and scripted dramas. So many filmmakers start out being unsatisfied with subject matter that is familiar to them and insist on contriving serious scripts about E. S. P., miracles, psycho killers or ghosts, for example. Others have the good sense to know that a serious treatment of these subjects by a filmmaker with no firsthand experience will, more often than not, look awkward. Denis Pellerin's film *Danse Macabre* recognizes this problem; his psycho killer is a huge, bald guy with dark rings under his eyes and blood-soaked hands. He even walks the streets in broad daylight with a knife or an axe in his hand.

This year's Norman McLaren award winner (the festival's top prize) doesn't feel at all uncomfortable focussing on more mundane situations. For the second year in a row, Arto Paragamian picked up the McLaren award, this year for *Across the Street*. (See interview) The script is contrived but it doesn't bother us because he obviously has a handle on what is real. The immigrant experience portrayed in *Across the Street* is something he has lived and, as a result, he is able to make ordinary situations very colorful.

Andre Turpin's *Comme Hier Matin* is one long take in a diner and it attempts to handle common situations colorfully as well. More often than not the film succeeds. However, in a film with no camera movement, cuts, effects, etc., the set becomes more of a theatrical stage and the acting becomes paramount. Unfortunately the acting fell short in a few places, but the film still won the top prize in the fiction category along with Rick Ashe's *All in Passing*, the only film from Saskatchewan.

Peter Wellington was another filmmaker whose familiarity with his subject was evident. *Pool* presents us with four different perspectives which pushes the game of the title into the philosophical realm. *Pool* is a writer's film and it works quite well as such.

My personal favorite was Luc Barcelo's *Café Pluie*, a film in which a client in a café tries to get served by an unresponsive waiter. The set and other characters are drawn on the walls in comic-book style and the whole atmosphere changes every so often. The client is not much more than a cartoon character himself as he does everything he can think of to get served. At one point he resigns himself to the fact that he isn't going to get served and starts remembering his past and the coffees that went with it. (e.g. Marxist phase - *café cereale*). "Good memories of good coffee," he says as he puts photographs (cartoons, actually) of himself back in his pocket along with a 20-inch-thick dictionary and a coffee pot and cup. Of all the films screened at this year's festival, *Café Pluie* was the best example of imaginative resourcefulness which is, to a great extent, what student filmmaking is all about. ●

## Student fest under fire

The Coordinator  
Canadian Student Film Festival,  
I s the Canadian Student Film Festival for all Canada or just to promote the Concordia University students' films? If we are going to show the world the work of our future generation then we should be selective and quality conscious too. After watching the large number of films allowed from Concordia in the festival (August 27-31, 1988 in Montreal) one wonders about the honest intentions of the organizers.

Yes, the festival is organized by the Concordia staff, and gives a very good exposure to student filmmakers by running along with the World Film Festival, but do they have to be so blatant in promoting their own films?

In almost every category the winning prizes were given to Concordia students. It seems, to escape this embarrassment, they allowed two joint winners from other film schools. Also, the merits for technical quality of filmmaking were largely ignored.

In a bilingual country, the selection of the jury is important. One of the jury members I met did not understand English at all, and there was no translation or subtitling for the films. Under such circumstances, one has to question the authenticity of proper judging.

I had a chance to see most of the student films along with some experienced filmmakers and people with no filmmaking experience. They all were surprised the way winners were selected. This year's selections and the judging were not fair. And is fair play too much to ask?

Jay Bajaj  
Toronto

Dear Mr. Bajaj,  
I received your strange letter concerning the visibility of Concordia University's student films at the Canadian Student Film Festival. It is the first time that we have received such an unfair letter in the 19 years of the Student Film Festival.

The truth is that at pre-selection time we receive more films from Concordia students than from any other Canadian university. There are several reasons for this: Montreal students are probably more aware of the exceptional exposure they will get with the presentation of their films during the prestigious Montreal World Film Festival. Also, in some universities, cinema professors do a sort of pre-selection and send us only some of the films which are eligible. At Concordia University, each student is free to submit his/her film. Therefore, a

university which sends us 40 films for pre-selection has a better chance of having many films selected than a university which only sends us two films.

Our pre-selection committee has nothing to do with Concordia. This year 120 films and videos were screened by the pre-selection committee; 78 films and videos were selected. The origin of the films was never taken into account by the committee. I think that this is the only way to be fair to the students.

The jury of the Festival has nothing to do with Concordia University either (members of the jury were French filmmaker Jean-Daniel Simon, National Film Board of Canada filmmaker Jacques Giraldeau, and Vancouver filmmaker Fumiko Kiyooka who won the Norman McLaren Award in 1985). Actually, three years in a row we had one member who came from a Vancouver university, simply because three years in a row the winner was from Vancouver.

I was present during the last jury session. They had their notes, which included the titles of the films, but no information about the origin of the films or the names of the student-filmmakers. When I informed them that the winner of the Norman McLaren Award they had unanimously chosen, was the same student who had won the Norman McLaren Award in 1987, with another film, they were both surprised and delighted. Two different juries two years in a row, decided to give the Norman McLaren Award to Arto Paragamian. This says a lot for Arto's work and we sincerely hope to see more of his films in the future. It does not matter whether he studied at Concordia University or another university. The important thing is that he has talent and that it was recognized by two different juries.

Some other winners of the Norman McLaren Award have become quite famous. The most eloquent example in recent years is Jean-Claude Lauzon, who won the Norman McLaren Award in 1979 as a student of UQAM (not Concordia). He has since then made several award-winning shorts and a feature film *Un Zoo la nuit*, which won a record number of Genie Awards this year. Also in this case, the important thing was Jean-Claude's talent and not the university he studied at.

You were the scriptwriter and producer of the film *Impotent Me* which did not win anything at the Student Film Festival this year. We wish you better luck in the future.  
Danièle Cauchard  
Coordinator  
Canadian Student Film Festival