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Cinema sans Sense

GUY L. COTÉ

GUY L. COTÉ is a twenty-seven-year-old Canadian who spent five years studying at Oxford, England. While there, he directed the film-ballet *Between Two Worlds* and produced a documentary on skiing, *Sestrières 1949*. He is at present directing films for the National Film Board of Canada.

A CHILD WHO has played with a new toy long enough to become tired of it will naturally want to destroy it or throw it away. Indeed, who hasn't tried to scratch the eyes out of an old teddy bear at least once in his life? The novelty has worn off, the house of cards is brushed aside gleefully. And this is exactly what the *avant-garde* movement is now trying to accomplish with our newest and most complicated art form: it seems that some Parisian intellectuals have vowed to destroy the cinema.

A new movement (or should we say a new cult?) has mushroomed in St. Germain-des-Prés. It has flourished because youth breeds eccentricity, and because eccentricity soon becomes an end in itself. It has flourished because the motion picture had, until this new movement appeared, been the only valid art form on which a concentrated destructive attack had not been launched within the last hundred years. Briefly, the movement wants to achieve a fourfold purpose: destroy the image by making it unbearably banal or completely unrecognizable; add a sound track bearing little or no relation to the picture; introduce a new screen of irregular shape and strewn with random objects; and finally, plant demonstrators in the audience in order to awaken the spectator into a more active participation not only with the film but with the producer, the manager of the theater, the projectionist, and the police. To illustrate their meaning, Jean Isodore Isou and his pupil, Maurice Lemaître, have each made a film—the first called *Traité de bave et d'éternité*—the second, *Le film est déjà commencé?* Members of the same group have also made a com-

mercial effort called *Désordre*, which has already been disowned by some adherents as a trifle of no consequence. For the author this film seems to possess a certain *verve*; it is amusing enough, although it seems to be no revolution in film making.

Le film est déjà commencé?, although it has not yet been shown under conditions entirely satisfactory to its maker, has been published in book form,¹ and, as such, it forms highly entertaining reading material. In it are separately described Sound, Image and "Spectator Manifestations." Before the showing itself, writes Lemaître, a 16-mm. projector in the lobby of the theater projects some of the old classics, such as *Intolerance*. At the same time paid stooges first throw buckets of water at the waiting audience and then try to convince them to go elsewhere (suggesting, for example, a hotel room to a young couple). Once inside, the audience meets charwomen busy with their work, the imprecations of the manager, and a long speech by Maurice Lemaître on the subject of his film.

After this performance, the film begins with seven negative shots taken from any old movie, while someone recites a fragment of a *lettrist* poem (a sort of French double talk). The rest of the film has no visual continuity whatsoever; but it has a sound track which speaks chiefly about Maurice Lemaître (who is not yet thirty years old), explains the ideas behind the film and its imaginary reception by the Press, and announces finally that the last reel has been lost—so the projection can't be finished and please, will everybody go home?

Pour un cinéma ailleurs! is today the message of St. Germain-des-Prés; its battle cry has been heard in Cannes and can be read on innumerable yellow posters near the Latin-Quarter Ciné-Clubs. The violence of the outcry could well be a reaction to our own excesses: writers on the cinema, when not abstracting themselves to the highest planes of specialist criticism, have hammered home to the populace that the film is VERY DEFINITELY AN

¹ Maurice Lemaître, *Le film est déjà commencé?* (Paris: Editions André Bonne, 1952).

art. The theme was recently taken up by one Canadian Film Society that printed the motto “Film is an Art” hundreds of times, as background to their prospectus—somewhat like the “one dollar one dollar one” on the dollar bill. Excessive zeal may not necessarily be the correct approach to convert the cynical, but we do not think it is the overabundance of our enthusiasm which has prompted the Parisian intellectuals to revolt.

Neither can we dismiss the Isou-Lemaître movement as a spectacular stunt for the benefit of its animators. Although Lemaître has openly admitted to the author that noise and publicity should be associated with the projection of his film, hoaxes do not live long in St. Germain—and this one has been going on for the last three years.

The chaotic activities of the *lettrists*, for all their eccentricity, stem from much clear-cut Gallic logic. Given the original premise—“The cinema has this in common with the churches, that in either we are bored to tears,” about which one can argue but scarcely dogmatize—Isou and Lemaître develop their theories with a precision of argument one could wish on some of our fuzziest film critics. Basing their contention on the general theory that any art form must first flourish but then inevitably degenerate, the *lettrists* divide the cinema’s history into two phases: the first, *amplique*, is exemplified by the standard Hollywood product; the second, *ciselant*, will be the cinema of the future, the logical death of commercial film, rampaging through its sacrosanct tenets and financial superstructure.

The writer of this article once asked Lemaître if the presence of trained acrobats in front of the screen together with a philosophical lecture on the sound track about the principles of *lettrism* were not an attempted return to the *dada* movement of the ’thirties, which to us today represents the *derrière-garde* at its most stupefying. While agreeing to this viewpoint, Lemaître added: “The presentation of my film may *look* like a *dada* evening, but that’s just in order to wake the audience from their

complacent stupor. I'm excited about my film because it is new. If someone had thought of *le cinéma ciselant* in 1930, my ideas would no longer be valid; neither would I have the slightest interest in them."

Certainly no other person has ever tried to make a feature film out of endless shots of himself wandering around the streets of St. Germain; nor has anyone ever dared to include in his film, under the pretext of "art," a few banal extracts from some American western or romantic film, daubed over with paint until nothing can be recognized any longer. Lemaître has incorporated in his release print old laboratory scraps, alternate black and white leader, randomly scratched emulsion, and negatives that have been soaked in hot sudsy water to make the gelatine run and reticulate. When Isou showed his film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, at the Cannes Festival a few years ago, before Jean Cocteau and the cream of the international critics, only the sound track had been completed. This he played for more than an hour, explaining away the black screen by saying that the images were not really important anyway. Quite possibly, at that time, the negatives were still being processed in a Bendix washing machine.

Such a thorough disregard for all that is sacred to the cinematographer may amuse the hard-boiled film magnate, but the activities of the *lettrist* group are just a little disturbing, and seem to us indicative of a strange malaise. Is this movement a sign that the vanguard of thinking people no longer consider the cinema a valid art form? Or is it a sign that commercialism is sapping the life blood of the cinema, and that the artist, by being forced to compromise at every step, will sooner or later become as anaemic an individual as the lifeless films he wishes to disown? Some of these artists think Isou may not have to wait long before the cinema dies—but of a natural death. Thorold Dickinson has said that the art of the film has not made any significant progress since Griffith and Eisenstein. Jean Vigo's shooting star, after an instant of burning glory, spent itself too soon; and the great French *avant-*

garde of the 1920's flickers only occasionally on the screens of isolated film libraries. Would that their creators could jump out of the reels, disrupt the complacency of the producer in his studio Cadillac, plant a few cobblestones in the way of those fluid-drive tracking shots.

Now that television is with us, popular feeling also has it that the cinema's days may be numbered. Already we read of television drive-in theaters being jammed bumper to bumper, of rioting, of mass hysteria, of a box-office business that makes the Hollywood superlatives shrink to diminutives. And so the technicians are currently spending vast sums of money in an effort to perfect "panoramic cinemas." They are prepared for any solution except better movies. The discontent seems to lie deep within the industry itself. Film magnates fear that Technicolor and R.C.A. sound are *passé*, and that the audience of tomorrow will demand to be engulfed in stereoscopic image and stereophonic sounds—in fact Aldous Huxley's "feelies" may be a possibility for the next World's Fair.

And what of the sour-puss critics who see in every 1953 package the pale carbon copy of a 1925 cliché? Some of them believe that there is nothing new under the sun, and that it is useless to look for new and exciting patterns through any camera lens. Many are asking whether the practice of remaking an old film, or of providing a series of sequels to any successful new one, or even of buying foreign pictures with the avowed purpose of copying them more or less slavishly, does not reveal, to say the least, a distinct lack of originality.

Notwithstanding the qualms of artist, audience, and critic alike, the author thinks that Isou, his fellow "destructionists," and all those gloomy prophets are wrong—even if they are justified in feeling bored to tears by what they usually see on the screen. There are still many undiscovered alleyways in the labyrinth of film making, and the *lettrists*, stumbling among the slums and the dead ends, have forgotten that they might have looked elsewhere—

to places where the present is more alive than the past. New methods are being evolved, new talents discovered, new values found. A Dutchman has filmed his country through the rippled reflections in its canals. In Canada, a bespectacled artist is painting colored patterns directly onto a strip of film. A gray-haired Frenchman in a dirty raincoat has wedded his own images and the words of George Bernanos in a way no one has ever done before and has thus created a masterpiece, *Le journal d'un curé de campagne*, which is neither story-film nor story-novel but rather, an intense emotional experience whose formula breaks all the accepted rules. An American director has adapted *An American Tragedy* into a daring experiment of lingering dissolves and sustained close-ups, an experiment all the more unlikely since it has come straight out of one of Hollywood's major studios. Bert Haanstra, Norman McLaren, Robert Bresson, and George Stevens are the artists of today, and they are finding new riches in the land that the *lettrists* have declared stale and barren.

In fact, with the advent of television, much of the cinema's social responsibility in the field of education, information, and mass communication has been passed on to the television screen which is infinitely better adapted to this purpose. Far from being a death knell, television will free the cinema. At last, film will be able to concentrate on its real function, that of an artistic medium of expression, a medium that has scarcely been explored.