

## **From *Chants populaires* to *Chansons contemporaines*: Pop, Politics, and Film**

By Anthony Kinik

This paper amounts to a brief history of the relationship between animation and popular music at the National Film Board of Canada from the early 1940s until the early 1970s. Beginning with the *Chants populaires* series produced by Norman McLaren in the early 1940s and culminating with the *Chansons contemporaines* series produced by René Jodoin (McLaren's protégé and long-time collaborator), these proto-music videos stand out both because of their imaginative and often experimental approach to animation and because of their daring use of song, French-language song. By the 1960s, within the highly charged atmosphere of the Quiet Revolution-era National Film Board, the *Chansons contemporaines* films were right at the center of the debates and struggles of the times. The best of them—films like Jean-Thomas Bédard's *La Ville*—captured this moment with considerable artistry and insight, but, sadly, by 1974 this moment was lost.

1949: Oskar Fischinger, *Motion Painting No. 1*

1964: Richard Lester, *A Hard Day's Night*

1966: D.A. Pennebaker, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," *Don't Look Back*

1967: Peter Goldman, "Strawberry Fields Forever"

1968: Norman McLaren, *Pas de Deux*

[etc.]

--Matt Hanson, "Flash Cuts, Whip Pans: A Snapshot History of the Music Video" in *Reinventing Music Video* (13).

Beginning with five films in 1969, the recently created French Animation Unit of the National Film Board of Canada, under the direction of 25-year NFB veteran René Jodoin, debuted a new series of films: *Chansons contemporaines*. As the title suggests, these films featured contemporary songs written and performed by some of Quebec's leading *chansonniers*. Pairing these singer-songwriters with some of the French animation unit's brightest young talent, these films amounted to a series of music videos *avant la lettre*. In each case, the filmmaker was assigned the task of creating a visual accompaniment for an existing song. The length of the song dictated the running time of the film, a reversal of the typical relationship between soundtrack music and moving image found throughout cinema history. The series only lasted

from 1969 to 1972 and went on to include just two more films, for a total of seven films.

That *Chansons contemporaines* anticipated the international explosion of the music video genre in the wake of MTV's emergence in the early 1980s has not gone completely unnoticed, in spite of the near total absence of literature on these films. The NFB's retrospective anthology of René Jodoin's work, produced as part of the *Collection mémoire* series a few years ago, included a detailed booklet covering Jodoin's biography and the significance of his filmography. Here, Michel Tanguay remarks on the diversity of approaches and treatments that characterized *Chansons contemporaines*, and how the series earned Jodoin the (somewhat unfortunate) title of "*le grand-père du vidéoclip au Québec*"(9).

Given proper attention, however, one finds that the *Chansons contemporaines* series bears only a superficial resemblance to the music video as we have come to know it, and that, in fact, it is the ways in which it contrasts with the music video genre that are more revealing. Moreover, upon closer inspection, the *Chansons contemporaines* series begins to seem like a pivotal moment in the history of the NFB, not to mention a telling moment in the history of Québécois popular music and popular culture production. In order to explore these intersecting histories more closely, though, we have to turn the clock back some six decades, to the early 1940s and the very beginnings of the NFB.

### ***Chants populaires***

As is well known, the history of the National Film Board of Canada is dominated by the looming figure of John Grierson, a "modern-day Prophet of Cinema," as Gary Evans put it, whose vision and conviction that film art should be wielded "as a hammer" exercised so much influence over the direction of Canadian filmmaking and Canadian documentary filmmaking in particular (not to mention documentary film at the international level), that his name became an adjective, "Griersonian" (Evans 3, Elley 31). As many have noted, the foil to Grierson's pedagogical, programmatic, and frankly propagandistic approach to cinema during those heady wartime years, as well as afterwards, was played by Grierson's friend and long-time colleague, Norman McLaren. Grierson brought McLaren to the NFB in 1941 as his junior associate after a stint in New York City where the myth of McLaren as a loner, an obsessive, and perhaps even a genius had begun to take shape. Yet McLaren's interest in making artisanal films, films over which he could exercise the utmost control, had been met with only limited success in New York (Marshall 19). Sure, he made commissioned films for NBC and even Guggenheim during his time in New York, but for the

most part McLaren was frustrated and impoverished in America, unable to find his niche. Conditions in Ottawa, on the other hand, in the lumber mill that housed the fledgling NFB, were surprisingly hospitable. For one thing, McLaren and Grierson were true fellow travelers.<sup>1</sup> They had first worked together as part of the General Post Office film unit in the United Kingdom after Grierson had been impressed by one of McLaren's student films from his days at the Glasgow School of Art, the delirious trick film *Camera Makes Whoopee* (1934) (Elley 34). And while their approaches to filmmaking could not have been more different—Grierson's being primarily matter-of-fact, rhetorical, and insistent, designed to inspire and edify, while McLaren's tended towards the poetic, the whimsical, and the non-objective, if not purely formalist—both shared an antipathy to the type of dreams churned out by the studio system in Hollywood, not to mention a political sensibility which placed trust in socially committed filmmaking. While Sydney Newman, another early NFB employee, and one who would go on to fill Grierson's shoes as director of the organization in later years, recalled Grierson telling his young recruits that he did not want them to get "artsy-craftsy" on him, by 1942 McLaren had already founded the Animation Unit at the NFB and had set about cultivating the aesthetic of professional amateurism that would define his work for the next few decades at the NFB (Elley 31). As he put it in a 1936 address to the Royal Photographic Society in London,

"I was an amateur for about four years before becoming a professional, and in my spare time I still carry on amateur work, on substandard film, because, although an amateur is limited in technical equipment, he has a certain freedom in certain respects which is not possessed by a professional." (McLaren 31)

At the NFB McLaren was able to be both an "amateur" and a "professional" simultaneously.

The Griersonian vision may have gotten an earlier start and it may have been more immediately influential—it certainly had a forceful exponent behind it—but Norman McLaren's own vision, which reached something of a zenith in the early 1950s with the stunning success of *Neighbours* (1952), began to make an impact even before the end of World War II, and in some ways it has exerted a more lasting influence.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes here, though, McLaren made two decisions early on in his NFB residency that were of particular importance. First, in 1943, in a manner that recalled his own recruitment, he hired René Jodoin straight out of art school to

---

<sup>1</sup> Although not exactly in the hysterical, McCarthyite sense that would dog the NFB later in the decade and into the 1950s.

<sup>2</sup> It certainly has not been challenged and discredited repeatedly over the years in the same way that Grierson's reputed philosophy of film has been.

join the newly created Animation Unit. Second, in 1944 he began to make a series of wartime films designed to bolster morale by getting audiences to participate in the most innocuous of activities: singing. Here, McLaren did not use the highly ironic tone he had used in his paranoid 1944 short *Keep Your Mouth Shut*,<sup>3</sup> nor did he use the boosterist, if playful, tone he had employed for his 1941 short *V for Victory*, with its confident images of marching legs and its rousing John Philip Sousa score. This time McLaren just wanted his audiences to enjoy the simple pleasures of song.

McLaren had long been fascinated with the relationship between film and music and the notion of film as music. Oskar Fischinger's *Hungarian Dance* (1931), with music by Brahms, was a major influence on McLaren and many of his early films featured the relationship between music and image prominently: *Mail Early* and *Five for Four*, which riffed on Benny Goodman's "Jingle Bells" and Albert Ammons' "Pinetop Boogie", respectively; *Hen Hop* (1942), which moved to the rhythm of a square dance number; and *V for Victory* (Elley 33, La Rochelle 27). He would go on to explore the possibilities of working with film and music in many of his later, greater films, including *Begone Dull Care* (1949), his legendary collaboration with Oscar Peterson, *A Chairy Tale* (1957), where he and Claude Jutra turned to Ravi Shankar for the soundtrack, and *Spheres* (1969), where he and Jodoin worked with Glenn Gould. In 1974, looking back on his work, McLaren told an interviewer that in more than half of his films he considered the soundtrack to be "probably more important than the image" (Elley 35). But it was during the years immediately following his creation of the NFB Animation Unit, the years in question here, that McLaren's fascination became explicit.

Oddly, the first series of musical shorts produced by the NFB consisted of six programs, each composed of two songs selected from the French and French-Canadian folk music repertoire, perhaps indicating continued concern on the part of McKenzie King's government over Quebec's commitment to the war effort. The series was called *Chants populaires* and the title card for the series diplomatically declared the series to be a collaboration between "l'Office National du Film, Ottawa" and "le Service de Ciné-Photographie de la Province de Québec" (later to become the *Office du Film du Québec*). McLaren organized a team of young animators that even included a very young George Dunning, who would go on to make one of the recognized classics of both the animated film genre and the musical genre, *Yellow Submarine*, his

---

<sup>3</sup> In this film, a horrific-looking skull addressed itself to its loose-lipped audience members with the following words of gratitude: "The Axis wishes to thank you for your magnificent service. Carry on, gossipers and blabbers, your words are dynamite for Nazi bombs."

1968 collaboration with The Beatles. The series included lively sing-alongs like the refreshingly anti-royalist *En roulant ma boule* (#1, 1943), which sends up the follies of the aristocracy from the perspective of the peasantry, and a proudly *habitant* version of *Envoyons d'avant nos gens!* (#2, 1943), which transposes the song's action to rural Quebec in the wintertime and features Dunning's signature cutout work from the period—in this case, lively scenes of a *raquetteur* making his way across the landscape. The series also contained gentler, more lyrical numbers like Jean-Paul Ladouceur's *Auprès de ma blonde* (#2, 1943), which is mysteriously announced as an old French song from the 16<sup>th</sup> century in spite of its reference to Versailles, and McLaren's own now-classic *Là-haut sur ces montagnes* (1946), with its eerie, high-pitched vocal and its dreamy pastels, which call to mind the work of the French symbolist painter Henri Rousseau. McLaren's other directorial contribution to *Chants populaires* was his 1946 short *C'est l'aviron*, which played alongside *Là-haut sur ces montagnes* as part of #6 and featured a brilliant evocation of a canoe's movements across the Canadian hinterland. *C'est l'aviron* remains one of McLaren's most beautiful films, and it stands out as one of the two real highlights of the series, the other being Alexander Alexeïeff's stunning neo-Constructivist *En passant* (#5, 1943), with its boldly graphic opening and closing sequences and its breathtaking cut-away view of a church. Alexeïeff was one of only four directors (along with Fischinger, Émile Cohl, and Len Lye) who McLaren later acknowledged as true influences on his own style, so bringing the Russian director in to work on a film for his *Chants populaires* series must have been a great thrill (Elley 36). In any case, the partnership resulted in an inspired short and a fine example of the dynamism and internationalism of the early NFB.

In contrast with the *Chants populaires* films, the second of these Norman McLaren-produced series of musical shorts was primarily Anglophone, as indicated by the series title, *Let's All Sing Together*, and whereas the earlier series had featured a starker mix of song styles, the focus here, again as indicated by the title, was baldly participatory. The series numbered six programs of short films, all of which were made in the dying years of the war, 1944-1945, and while none of the programs ran longer than ten minutes, each featured multiple songs in the popular idiom, from American classics like "Oh, Susannah" and "Short'nin' Bread" (strangely, given the NFB's nationalism), to overt morale-boosters like "Pack Your Troubles," to foot-stomping instrumentals like the square dance tune that accompanies the Jodoin film *Quadrille*. The films played up each song's lyrics, sometimes in a manner that anticipates modern-day karaoke displays, where the rhythm of the song is indicated graphically. They were explicitly meant to move their audiences to song, something the *Chants populaires* films had only experimented with on occasion, like in #2 when the intertitle

"PLUS FORT" came up from time to time during *Envoyons d'avant nos gens!*. The primary exhibition site for *Let's All Sing Together* was the non-theatrical agit-prop film circuits devised by Grierson to get the word out to even the most outlying regions of Canada as an exercise in nation-building during a period of international crisis (Evans 6). These shows were premised on the idea of providing "education, inspiration, and [the promise] of a better tomorrow," and, as Gary Evans has noted, their 90-minute programs might include "a sing-along film by Norman McLaren, an instructional film on nutrition, or a recently retired theatrical short or two that explained Canada's strategic place in the world conflict" (6). The *Chants populaires* films had been produced with the very same audience in mind, but the films' role in such programs had generally been soft-pedaled. With the *Let's All Sing Together* series, the function of these programs was upfront, plain to see and hear. While the occasional song might have encouraged the kind of stiff upper lip one would expect from His Royal Highness's war effort, the majority were obviously intended to provide a welcome interlude in a program that might otherwise be on the weighty side, and the prominent use of intertitle cards urging the audience to sing louder, not to mention the occasional voice-over pleading, "C'mon, folks, you can do better than that" (as in #6), indicate the NFB's desire to connect with its audience on a visceral level, one that avoided the pitfalls of simply appealing to the public's *ratio*.

While most of the featured songs in *Let's All Sing Together* were in English, as noted above, one of the first of these films, and the one that is of most interest to the present essay, was McLaren and Jodoin's *Alouette* from 1944 (*Let's All Sing Together* #1). Created with single-frame animation and paper cutouts, *Alouette* was a stark black and white film that took a highly recognizable, perhaps even banal, French tune and gave it a modernist sensibility. One of the numerous films made by McLaren that feature birds prominently, and especially birds that are playfully dismembered then re-membered, or reconstructed, including *Hen Hop* (1942) and *Le Merle* (1958), the filmmakers appear to have taken great glee in the song's tale of mild sadism. The end result was a film that was clever, even a bit droll, one that was stylized in such a way that it did not talk down to its audience, and of the dozens of films that make up the series, it is still the one that holds up the best. McLaren and Jodoin must have been pleased with their work—it was the beginning of a partnership that would last some 25 years.



**Spheres/Sphères**

Directed by / Réalisé par René Jodoin,  
Norman McLaren  
Produced by / Produit par René Jodoin,  
Norman McLaren

*Pictured / Sur l'image: Norman McLaren;  
René Jodoin*

© 1969 National Film Board of Canada /  
Office national du film du Canada. All  
rights reserved / Tous droits réservés.

What is clear is that the successes of *Alouette* and his work for *Chants populaires* inspired McLaren to continue making short animated films based on French songs, such as his *La poulette grise* from 1947 and his *Le Merle*, which stands in many ways as a companion piece to *Alouette*. McLaren was also encouraged to continue working with Jodoin, their 25-year working partnership culminating in *Spheres*, their 1969 release which used Glenn

Gould's interpretation of Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* to such timeless effect. The NFB was pleased, too. In 1946, the agency launched yet another series of musical films—one that was somewhat less prolific than the McLaren-produced series, amounting to only three films in the end—which they called *Chansons de chez nous*, and for which *La poulette grise* was made. Producers for this series included McLaren, James Beveridge, and Tom Daly, the head of the NFB's famed Unit B. While the *Chants populaires* films had focused on the Québécois context, if subtly at times, *Chansons de chez nous* seemed to look to the motherland for inspiration: France. While *La poulette grise* allowed McLaren to continue to work out his apparently complex feelings about birds, and hens in particular, and Wolf Koenig and Jean-Pierre Ladouceur's *Sur le pont d'Avignon* (1951) was sure to become a classroom favourite, the best of the lot was the first film in the series, George Dunning's *Cadet Roussel* (1946). Combining a brilliant use of cutouts, a daring use of movement, and a use of depth of field in the closing hot-air balloon sequence that can only be described as stunning, this was the NFB film which best captured Dunning's enormous talents as an animator, the one that best anticipated the richness and complexity of *Yellow Submarine*, his sole feature film. The short's 18<sup>th</sup>-century period setting and its infectious sense of mischief best highlights the promise held by his never-completed *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. Two years later, Dunning left the NFB. Aside from a couple of brief forays into animated shorts, he spent the better part of the next 20 years making his living in the publicity and industrial films sector.

Because Grierson moved on from the NFB soon after the end of the war to take up a post at the newly created UNESCO, leaving McLaren behind as the sole Briton at the NFB, there is a tendency to equate Grierson's work at the NFB with wartime propaganda. The reality, however, is that one of Grierson's mantras right from the start had to do with the belief that the NFB's mandate was much larger, much more long-term than just that of a wartime propaganda agency and that the real task at hand would be to keep the NFB relevant during peacetime, to ensure that the NFB was up to the task of capturing the full range of perspectives and views that made up Canada's contemporary situation. "Peace must be made more exciting than war," he was fond of saying (Evans 4). And, truth be told, Grierson's record as director of the NFB is impressive in its variety, in its ability to attend to the pressing needs of the war effort and the Herculean task of bringing Canadians together, while simultaneously making room for his talented staff to flex their creativity and even show off their "artsy-craftsy" sides. The *Chants populaires* and *Let's All Sing Together* series are perfect examples of the kind of balance that was struck at the NFB during World War II, but they were also films that looked forward to peacetime. In particular, it is not hard to see *Alouette* along with *En roulant ma*

*boule*, *Envoyons d'avant nos gens!*, *C'est l'aviron*, and the rest of the *Chants populaires* series as films designed to help build the utopian dream of a fully democratic, bilingual Canadian state, a full ten years before the NFB's momentous move to Montreal in 1956, and some twenty-five years before the adoption of official bilingualism under the Trudeau administration, with McLaren as the architect (Mackenzie 118).

What made these films all the more daring at the time was the fact that they approached this gargantuan task via the French-Canadian song. This may seem unremarkable now, but with the notable exception of La Bolduc (née Mary Travers), who became an unlikely sensation in Quebec beginning in the late-1920s in spite of the fact (or maybe because of it) that her saucy material and her unrepentant delivery raised the hackles of Quebec's elite classes, there was virtually no French-language popular music production in Canada up to the time of *Chants populaires* (Boldrey 87). And while the earliest *chansonniers* would begin to make a tiny bit of headway in the early 1950s—most famously Felix Leclerc, who was received with adoration in Paris—it was not until the 1960s that singing French-Canadian songs in Canada would begin to lose its powerful stigma of dispossession (Boldrey 84). This is not to say that there were no French songs being performed in Canada during this same period, but they were all either coming from France or they were French-Canadian interpretations of chart-topping American pop tunes, licensed translations of Bing Crosby hits by the Québécois crooner Jean Lalonde and the like, produced by the parent recording labels, not artistic renditions decided upon by the artist him- or herself (Boldrey 88, 91). This being the case, McLaren's decision to record French-Canadian songs and open up the possibility for French Canadians to hear themselves—no small matter at the time—was an open challenge to the status quo circa 1945, and it must be seen as one of the factors—minor though it may be—that, along with events like the nationalization of Quebec's hydro power and the creation of Radio-Canada, contributed to the lifting of the Great Darkness that had long stifled Quebec.

### ***Chansons contemporaines***

By the 1960s the National Film Board of Canada had changed dramatically. The agency had moved into its high-tech facilities in Ville St-Laurent, on the island of Montreal, in September 1956 (Mackenzie 118). Just a few months later, in January 1957, a press campaign in Montreal's *Le Devoir* was the opening shot in a movement that would eventually result in the creation of a distinct Francophone division at the NFB (Marshall 20). Already by 1958 the first generation of Québécois auteurs—*engagé* auteurs, that is—was starting to make waves with *cinéma direct* films like Michel

Brault and Gilles Groulx's *Les Raquetteurs*. By 1960, with the election of Jean Lesage's Liberal government, the tremors had turned to quakes as the period of reform and modernization and unrest that became known as the Quiet Revolution was officially underway. As things heated up and Quebec entered that period of the Quiet Revolution that was not so quiet, a sharply contested and often chaotic chapter that lasted from the mid-'60s until the end of the decade, the National Film Board was at the epicenter of the convulsions taking place. By the spring of 1964 Pierre Trudeau was railing against the "separatist counter-revolutionaries" who were said to call the NFB and Radio-Canada home in the pages of *Cité Libre*, while *Parti Pris*, the leading organ of Quebec's left-wing nationalist intelligentsia, responded with a barrage of articles on the question of Quebec national cinema written by a coterie of prominent NFB filmmakers that included Jacques Godbout, Gilles Carle, Gilles Groulx, and Denys Arcand. While the filmmakers essentially made a plea for the establishment of an auteurist Québécois cinema, one that would allow for feature films with a personal vision, as opposed to the highly constrained documentarist regime in place at the NFB, the journal's editor, Pierre Maheu, took things further, labeling the NFB a colonial institution, a federalist fifth column in the heart of Quebec. By 1966 Arcand, Groulx, and Brault had all left the NFB in order to start their own production company, *Cinéastes Associés* (Marshall 53). That very same year René Jodoin, who had left the NFB in 1949 to seek work in the private sector only to return in 1954, on the eve of the move to Montreal, and had been the head of the NFB's scientific division since 1963, was named the head of a brand-new French Animation Unit in 1966 and awarded a tight budget of \$50,000 (Tanguay 5-7; Carrière 185).

Like everything else at the NFB during this period, this move was not without its controversies. Some saw the creation of this new unit as yet another clear-cut instance of tokenism on the part of Ottawa. Others resented the priorities represented by this Animation Unit, arguing that animation was merely light entertainment, anti-realist in nature and therefore apolitical, and that the unit's budget would have been better spent either in documentary or feature film production (Tanguay 5-6). One must remember that, in addition to this being a period when the push for auteurist feature filmmaking was at its peak, this was also a time when the activism and agitation that brought about the politically charged *Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle* series was reaching a crescendo (Marshall 53). This was also a period when animated film was not taken particularly seriously in Quebec and was still referred to simply as "*les p'tits bonhommes*" in popular parlance. In spite of all this friction, Jodoin remained undeterred and he set about creating a division that was socially committed both in terms of theory and action, content and form (Tanguay 18).

At a time when industrial production in animation following the Disney studio model had reached a new high-water mark, with Disney, Warner Brothers, Hanna-Barbera, and others all in maximum overdrive, and the NFB's English Animation Unit clearly moving in lockstep with this dominant production model, Jodoin made a point of building his animation division according to an entirely different blueprint, one with a considerable amount of autonomy from the larger NFB apparatus, one that was adamantly artisanal, even experimental, in nature (Tanguay 7-8, 18-19). This environment was intended to provide Jodoin's French unit animators the space and freedom to pursue their personal visions, and in retrospect it is hard not to see this new animation studio as having been clearly, almost nostalgically, modeled on McLaren's 1940s-era Animation Unit (Carrière 181, 186). Jodoin remained the head of the French Animation Unit for over a decade, until 1977. During that time he produced some 29 animated films, nearly a quarter of which were part of a single series of films: *Chansons contemporaines* (Tanguay 7).

If cinema played an important part in the upheavals that characterized Quebec during the 1960s, popular music played an equally important, if not more important, role, and like Québécois cinema, the Québécois *chanson* really began to come into its own in the late 1950s. A producers' strike at CBFT in Montreal in late 1958 and early 1959 is credited with bringing an end to the so-called golden age of French-Canadian television broadcasting and further fanning the flames of the Quiet Revolution (not the least because it was this strike that brought an end to René Lévesque's popular show *Point de mire* and saw him consequently move into politics). Following the strike, two former Radio-Canada employees, Hervé Brousseau and Raymond Lévesque, started up a singing group and a small singer-songwriter-oriented cabaret—a *boîte à chansons*—which they named Les Bozos and Chez Bozo, respectively, after a song by Felix Leclerc. Though the *boîte à chansons* as a vehicle for Quebec's burgeoning singer-songwriter scene had been around in one form or another since the 1940s, the opening of Chez Bozo and the success of Les Bozos (which also included Jean-Pierre Ferland, Claude Léveillée, and others) marked the beginning of a period in Quebec when these songsmiths—who brought rural imagery and sounds to the urban context, creating a style at once modern and forward-looking and yet deeply traditional—moved to the forefront of Québécois culture in a manner roughly parallel to the Folk Revival that swept New York at the same time, vaulting Bob Dylan and others to international stardom (Aubé 47; Marshall 59-60). By 1960 none other than Edith Piaf had passed her blessing on to Chez Bozo, touching off a period during which France and Quebec, and indeed Belgium, were quite close musically, a fact further underlined by the victory of a young Québécois *chansonnier*, Jean-Pierre Ferland, in

1962's *Concours International de la Chanson Francophone* (Boldrey 101-2). By 1964 the division between the *chansonniers* and the *yéyés*—between *chansons qui pensent* and *chansons qui dansent*, as the rivalry was often described at the time—was defining popular music in Quebec (Millière 45). This split paralleled the antagonism between the pop and folk scenes raging in the US and the UK during the same period. If Quebec's yéyé scene captured a side of the Quiet Revolution that was modern, consumer-oriented, and relatively care-free, the *chansonniers* scene captured Quebec's surging nationalism—even if unintentionally at times. Thus, musician Claude Gauthier, who wrote "*Grand six pieds*" as a tribute to his father's work as a lumberjack, was surprised to find his song become a veritable anthem for the separatist cause simply because of its lyric, "*Je suis de nationalité Québécoise.*" In any case, by the mid-1960s there is no question that Quebec's *chansonniers* were "at the forefront of national cultural self-definition," so it is hardly shocking that we should find Quebec's young *engagé* directors teaming up with these singer-songwriters in an attempt to tap into this zeitgeist, and perhaps even define it (Marshall 59-60).

The NFB was quick to seize upon the charisma and wit of the godfather of the *chansonniers* scene of the 1960s, Felix Leclerc, first in Bernard Devlin's 1957 epic *Les Brûlés*, and then in Claude Jutra's highly ironic, self-reflexive 1958 portrait entitled *Félix Leclerc Troubadour*, a film that surely ranks among those that announced the arrival of Quebec cinema on the world stage. Many of the NFB's *cinéma direct* classics from the period, such as Brault and Groulx's *Les Raquetteurs* and Pierre Perrault's *Pour la suite du monde* (1962), echo the tensions between country and city, past and present, that were so crucial to the work of the *chansonniers*. Yet it was not until the mid- to late-1960s that Québécois filmmakers drew on the work of these kindred spirits in a sustained manner, or in a way that could be characterized as *indépendentiste*.

One of the first tentative steps in this direction was without question Jacques Godbout's *Fabienne sans son Jules* (1964), which starred Pauline Julien playing a chanteuse not unlike herself: a rising talent caught up in the glare of Quebec's rapidly emerging star system. While Fabienne's role as pop music starlet is of critical importance to the film and its depiction of Fabienne's adulation and consequent dislocation, the film's audience is only provided with brief glimpses of her talent. Instead the film focuses most of its attention on the breathlessness of Fabienne's life behind the scenes and specifically her efforts to reunite with her lover, Jean-Luc Godard (who never appears onscreen, of course, and played no part in the production), attempting to replicate the freedoms of the French New Wave's auteurist brand of cinema from within the walls of the NFB.

Ultimately, though, *Fabienne sans son Jules* was more an exercise in style, an homage, than anything else, and it was completely eclipsed by Gilles Groulx's hijacked NFB production *Le Chat dans le sac* (1964), a feature film originally meant to be a documentary that was also heavily indebted to the *Nouvelle vague*, but which did a much more convincing job of capturing the tense mood prevalent in Quebec at the time.

Three years later, Michel Brault's *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* emerged from Arcand, Groulx, and Brault's newly formed auteurist production house and it also took up the tale of a dislocated young Québécois songwriter. The production team had originally hoped to receive NFB backing for their project, but as Arcand later explained, the NFB's lack of receptiveness towards the screenplay finally drove the filmmakers to strike out on their own. The film's screenplay, which Arcand had co-authored, was rejected by Pierre Juneau because he was sick and tired of being confronted with the kind of "sordid" and "marginal" characters he claimed were being championed by Quebec's screenwriters at the time. "*Pourquoi pas faire des films sur des gens normaux, des gens ordinaires,*" Brault was asked, "*des citoyens d'Outremont par exemple, des gens avec des maisons de 40-45,000 piastres, deux enfant, deux chars, et un chalet au lac Taureau?*" (Houle et al. 15). For that film Juneau would have to wait twenty years, until Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (1986). *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* starred Claude Gauthier as an aspiring *chansonnier* who comes to Montreal from the country seeking fame and fortune, finds love and confusion instead, and in a twist borrowed from the family melodrama genre, winds up professionally and materially successful but alone and without love. In addition to Gauthier, whose character, Claude Tremblay, was really the archetypal *chansonnier*, a man of nature who establishes himself in the big city by winning a television-sponsored talent show with a rendition of Gauthier's own "*Grand Six Pieds*," the film starred fellow *chansonnier* Robert Charlebois, who was just on the verge of making his momentous switch to rock 'n' roll, and Geneviève Bujold in an early role which, though limited, allowed her to show off her special brand of mid-'60s mod glamour.

Two years later, Gilles Groulx released his own take on Montreal's maelstrom of pop and politics, the feature film *Où êtes-vous donc?* (1969), a film which was initially meant to be a documentary on the state of Quebec song, but which got hijacked by Groulx in much the same way as *Le Chat dans le sac* five years earlier. If *Fabienne sans son Jules* and *Le Chat dans le sac* called to mind Godard and Truffaut's work from the early days of the *Nouvelle vague*, *Où êtes-vous donc?* was clearly inspired by Godard's mid-'60s work—especially films like *Pierrot le fou* (1965)—with its Pop style, its Brechtian distancing effects (including some brilliant multi-

layered soundtrack sequences), and its curt discussions of political economy. The film even had real-life *chansonnier* Georges D'or playing a Maoist, Little Red Book-spouting songwriter in one of the film's three lead roles. Playing counterpoint to D'or's earnest Georges were the film's other two characters, Christian, an aspiring *yéyé* played by real-life *yéyé* Christian Bernard of the group the Hou-Lops, and Mouffe, a go-go dancer and *yéyé* singer played by Claudine "Mouffe" Monfette (who was an important part of Robert Charlebois' rock 'n' roll variety show, *l'Osstidcho*, in 1968 (Millière 68)). Oddly, however, the film's best musical sequences are the ones that send up the vacuous world of Christian and Mouffe's entry into the world of *yéyé* celebrity, including one scene with Christian and his band that spoofs Richard Lester's work with The Beatles. By comparison, Georges D'or's talents as a *chansonnier* never get the room to shine.

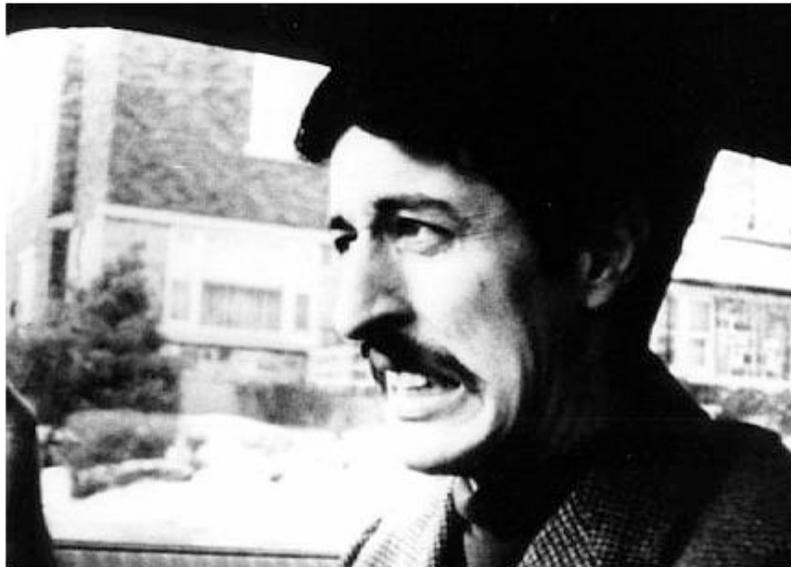
Like *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* before it and *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) after it, *Où êtes-vous donc?* was essentially another tale of young men from economically depressed Atlantic Canada trying to find their way in the big city, the modern world. But while the other two films have more or less conventional narrative structures, *Où êtes-vous donc?*, appropriately enough given its major points of reference, has a collage-like structure and a very open-ended narrative arc, the film's drive coming principally from the tensions it explores in vignette style: country versus city, pop versus folk, modern versus traditional, and so on. But one thing it shares with *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* and not with *Goin' Down the Road* is that while the rural areas in *Où êtes-vous donc?* were short on opportunities, they nonetheless provided some sort of ballast, some sense of self. Early on in the film Georges declares that if one is not from the countryside—from Mauricie, Abitibi, Gaspésie, and the like—then, "*on vient de nulle part*," and the film seems to uphold this view because Georges, the character with the deepest roots in the provinces, is also the film's most grounded character, its conscience, and the character whose voice-over sets the film in motion. He is also the character who brings the film to an abrupt end, screaming, "*Où êtes-vous donc, bande de câlisses?*" in frustration at no one in particular and therefore perhaps at everyone.

That very same year, 1969, René Jodoin launched his own ode to the *chanson Québécoise* with his series of French-language animated films appropriately titled *Chansons contemporaines*. Like the *Chants populaires*, *Let's All Sing Together*, and *Chansons de chez nous* series before it, the *Chansons contemporaines* series took preexisting songs and combined them with the work of young animators, and like the previous series, the results of this new series were mixed, with some films standing head and shoulders above the others. What was different about *Chansons*

*contemporaines* was that, as the title of the series suggests, the musical material was exclusively original, contemporary work, and that whereas previously the songs had come from the anonymous world of the traditional song, here the songs came from the auteurist world of the *chansonnier*. This meant that the series' songs were less likely to be sing-alongs with built-in collective appeal, and therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, the lyrics played little part in *Chansons contemporaines* whereas they had played an important part in the earlier films. This also meant that the material at hand was likely to be more pointed. The very fact that the *Chants populaires* series had featured French-Canadian folk songs had been enough to make the series political in an era when French-Canadian songs of any kind went unrecorded and largely unperformed. By the late 1960s French-Canadian songs of all types were widely available and widely performed so there was nothing inherently political about this series, but the fact that *Chansons contemporaines* chose to focus on the work of the *chansonniers* instead of the world of *yéyé* indicated that its creators intended the series to be socially committed, to face the issues of the day instead of turning (and perhaps even twisting) away from them.

While some of the films made for *Chansons contemporaines* hold up much better than others, as suggested above, what is notable and disappointing given the surprising heights reached by some of the films in McLaren's series of the 1940s, is that the songs tend to be much more consistent than the films. Even the slightest of all the musical numbers, Claude Gauthier's almost bubble-gum "Tête en fleurs" (from the 1969 film of the same name), even with its pathetic neo-Dixieland finale, is still stronger than Bernard Longpré's accompanying film. Its use of what appear to be sand drawings seem to have been completely uninspired by Gauthier's song and therefore lack even the faint pulse of the source material. More frustrating still is Pierre Moretti's film version of Claude Dubois' "Cerveau gelé" (1969). Here, the song, while lacking some pop finesse, is nonetheless one of the series' most interesting pieces, with its ironic take on the cult of progress and its dark underside, a rather bold statement given the furious pace of modernization underway in Quebec, and especially Montreal, at the time and the relative lack of debate that surrounded it. Unfortunately, the film, while featuring some of the cutting-edge computer animation techniques René Jodoin was in the process of pioneering at that very moment, completely undermined the song's potency with banal geometrics and, worse, silly anthropomorphic line drawings grooving to the song. Viviane Elnécavé's film version of Claude Gauthier's stirring evocation of the nihilism of youth, *Notre jeunesse en auto-sport* (1969), while not nearly as compelling as Gauthier's song, at least captures some of the song's

energy, its momentum, with its frenzied mix of photomontage and op-art visuals. Ultimately, however, it fails to locate the song's soul.



**Taxi**

Réalisé par Roland Stutz

Produit par René Jodoin

© 1969 Office national du film du Canada. Tous droits réservés.

*Chanson contemporaines'* two most successful films are not only the ones where sound and image actually live up to one another, creating a sense of unity lacking from most of the other films in the series, they are also the ones with among the least conventional approaches to animation. Roland Stutz's film *Taxi* (1969), based on a song by Claude Leveillé, captures effortlessly the insanity of the life of a big city taxi driver, the figure who best expresses the breakneck pace of modern life, its out and out mania, its roadblocks and frustrations, and its occasional, ever so brief, moments of peace and tranquility. Structured loosely as a day in the life of a cab driver, as he negotiates his way across space and time from morning to night (although the film also manages to move from fall to winter to spring in less than 2.5 minutes), Stutz's film utilizes the pixilation technique pioneered at the NFB by Norman McLaren and made famous the world over through the acclaimed *Neighbours*. Here, instead of using this animation technique in order to introduce the fantastical into an apparently verisimilitudinous world, as McLaren had in *Neighbours* and *A Chairy Tale*, Stutz shies away from the realm of the trick film and instead uses pixilation to further intensify the exhilaration of the song and Leveillé's rapid-fire delivery, creating a version of Montreal in the process that is even more fragmented, disorienting, and chaotic than the original. Stutz's film is also gleefully vernacular in tone, matching Leveillé's

proud, and at times hilarious, use of *joual* with a depiction of Montreal that is suitably working class and unglamorous, shunning the city's fashionable districts in favour of its tougher *quartiers* and rough-and-ready *casse-croûtes*.



### **La Ville**

Réalisé par Jean-Thomas Bédard  
Produit par René Jodoin

Photo tirée de la production  
© 1970 Office national du film du Canada. Tous droits réservés.

The true highlight of *Chansons contemporaines*, though, came in 1970 with Jean-Thomas Bédard and Jean-Pierre Ferland's collaboration on *La Ville*. Ferland's song was a sweeping, profound, and hauntingly beautiful take on one of the great themes of both the *chansonniers* and of Québécois film during the 1960s, a theme it shares with *Chansons contemporaines'* *Taxi*, *Cerveau gelé*, and *Les Fleurs de macadam* (1969): the city, with all its glaring contradictions. Beginning with just some ambient street sounds—traffic, pedestrians walking and chattering, etc.—and a bold, simple title sequence, the song's minor key piano fades in and Ferland begins his plaintive ode to the contemporary city, a "*havre de fous*" and an "*orphelineur*" that may eat people alive, but nonetheless manages to be "*si laid parfois que ça devient si beau.*" Bédard matches Ferland's vivid wordplay with a rapid succession of photomontages which are brought to life, animated through his use of camera movement and his editing, keeping up with the song's multiple crescendos. The style of Bédard's compositions is at once familiar and hard to pin down—calling to mind Pop Art collage work along the lines of Richard Hamilton's pivotal *Just What Is It That*

*Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956) as well as the Weimar era work of Sasha Stone, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and John Heartfield in equal measure<sup>4</sup>—before one sequence late in the film suddenly scraps photomontage in favour of motion picture shots of the streets of Montreal and its bright lights. While the connections between Ferland's lyrics and Bédard's visuals are at times vague, Bédard's film somehow succeeds in creating an ideal counterpart for Ferland's evocation of the city in all its complexity, and, in fact, it actually manages to up the ante, providing the song with more scope, more depth than it would have on its own. Nowhere is this truer than near the very end of the film, where Bédard suddenly introduces shots of protests and riots, from Paris in May 1968 and elsewhere, into Ferland's otherwise largely apolitical song. Given the context for the film's release and the events that would shake Quebec to the core that same year, Bédard and Ferland's collaboration takes on a perceptive, even prescient, appearance.

In his book *Quebec National Cinema*, Bill Marshall at one point discusses the problems associated with periodizing the Quiet Revolution—when it began, but especially, when it ended. He lists a number of possibilities—1966 and the return of the Union Nationale, 1973 and its international oil crisis, 1976 and the accession of the Parti Québécois to power, 1980 and its referendum on sovereignty-association—but strangely fails to mention 1970 even though there is little question that the October Crisis and its aftermath forever changed the very meaning of nationalism and the quest for sovereignty in Quebec (47). As Scott Mackenzie has put it:

"In many ways, it was a turning point for Quebec. It was at this moment that the political assemblies and utopian ideals of egalitarianism and social democracy that were central to Quebec nationalism—and a key part of *Société nouvelle*—waned in the face of the *realpolitik* of government."  
(159)

There is also no question that the events of 1970 had a huge impact on the NFB and on filmmaking in Quebec more generally (as alluded to by Mackenzie in the above quote). If documentary production at the NFB suddenly became even more politically engaged, more confrontational, and more trenchant than it had been previously—take Denys Arcand's *Québec: Duplessis et après*, his radical reinterpretation of recent Quebec history, for instance—it was also met with harsher treatment from the NFB's management, as in the case of Gilles Groulx's *24 heures ou plus...*

---

<sup>4</sup> Bedard, like Jodoin, was a product of the École des Beaux-Arts de Montréal (Carrière 185).

(1973) and Denys Arcand's *On est au coton* (1970/1976), both of which were met with censorship and other reprisals, sparking outrage. But by the mid-1970s Quebec's filmmakers had been pushed to the margins of the political debates of the time.

Quebec's *chansonniers*, on the other hand, reacted quite differently to the events of 1970. Whereas many of Quebec's leading filmmakers had been politically engaged for many years at the time of the October Crisis, Quebec's *chansonniers*, for the most part, considered themselves to be political naïfs, some of whom, like Gauthier, had been adopted by the nationalist cause quite by accident. But for some reason, because of allegiances real or imagined, quite a number of Quebec's prominent songwriters were among those arrested and detained as part of the imposition of the War Measures Act, including Pauline Julien and Claude Gauthier. Speculating on the reasons gun-toting Montreal police officers had searched his house at 2:00 a.m. one night, Gauthier later stated: "Was I arrested because of '*Grand six pieds*'? Maybe" (Boldrey 190). In any case, there is no question that the events of October 1970 had the effect of politicizing the *chansonniers*. Julien, Gauthier, Georges D'or, Robert Charlebois, Raymond Lévesque, Gilles Vigneault, and others all became active participants in the *Chants et poèmes de la résistance* events of 1971 and 1973, and proceeds from the live double album that resulted went to the *Mouvement pour la défense des prisonniers politiques québécois* (Boldrey 197). Even Felix Leclerc, who had always tried to remain a voice of moderation, got swept up in the fervor, writing a song in response to the October Crisis, "*l'Alouette en colère*," where he sang:

*J'ai un fils enragé  
Qui ne croit ni à Dieu, ni à diable, ni à moi  
J'ai un fils écrasé...  
Mon fils est en prison  
Et moi je sens en moi...  
Pour la première fois...  
S'installer la colère* (Boldrey 183-5).

By 1976, Quebec's *chansonniers* were being credited with having been key to the Parti Québécois' rise to power, and by that time Leclerc was definitely one of the acknowledged poets of the nationalist cause. He even wrote a neo-Jacobin song, "*l'An 1*," to commemorate the event.



**Tout écartillé**

Réalisé par André Leduc

Produit par René Jodoin

© 1972 Office national du film du Canada. Tous droits réservés.

Only one more film in the *Chansons contemporaines* series appeared after the October Crisis. In many ways André Leduc's *Tout écartillé* was the series' most ambitious film, a pixilated epic based on a song by the *chansonnier*-come-rock star Robert Charlebois that was more than twice as long as most of the other films in the series and clearly had the largest budget of them all. While the song was something of a hit at the time, its account of Charlebois' escapades in Paris in the '60s, of Marie Laforêt and Pigalle, failed to resonate with the Quebec question the way some of the series' other songs had, and its ambition as a film only served to make it a bigger flop than any of its counterparts. While the song is hardly the weakest song among the *Chansons contemporaines*, neither is it the best, and setting Charlebois' narrative in Montreal and its environs and populating it with black-clad, top hat-wearing visions of death, princesses, and other fantastical characters was misguided to say the least. And if the choice of song was not exactly politically stirring, it was hardly beyond redemption in this regard. One can imagine a treatment along the lines of Jean Pierre Lefebvre's *Jusqu'au coeur* (1968), where in one particularly brilliant scene Robert Charlebois himself is set running across the urban landscape of Montreal in a variety of different guises (the holy trinity: cop, priest, Montreal Canadien) while Lefebvre riddles the sequence with split-second shots of billboards and other forms of advertisement, creating a powerful set of Godardian links between the madness of Charlebois' character and the madness of commodity capitalism, between filmmaking in Montreal and filmmaking in Paris. Instead, *Tout Écartillé's* vision

was technically proficient but philosophically empty: energetic, whimsical, a tiny bit foreboding, but nothing more. This was definitely not the modern-day morality play, the high allegory, that was *Neighbours*; nor did it manage to pull off quotidian frenzy with any of the conviction of *Taxi*.

Though one might have expected big things from *Chansons contemporaines* post-October Crisis, given the occasional moments of brilliance Jodoin and company had produced in 1969 and 1970, the series appears to have lost its direction and come to an end with a whimper and not a bang, its final statement a bloated rock extravaganza that heralded Quebec's odd turn towards progressive rock—the most self-indulgent, apolitical, and Anglophone of musical genres—in the years to follow just as the Parti Québécois was ascending to power. Whether the series fizzled out because freedom of expression was somehow being muzzled even within the semi-autonomous utopia that was René Jodoin's French Animation Unit, or because Quebec's filmmakers and musicians suddenly felt uncomfortable working within the confines of the NFB and its fundamentally federalist project (the more likely scenario), either way, a promising moment in the history of Québécois popular culture and the prehistory of the music video was lost.

## Bibliography

Aubé, Jacques, *Chanson et Politique au Québec*, Montreal: Triptyque, 1990.

Boldrey, Susan M.S., *La chanson québécoise: reflet social d'un peuple*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1995.

Carrière, Louise, *Les Films d'Animation a l'ONF (1950-1984) et la Protestation Sociale*, unpublished PhD dissertation, McGill University Graduate Program in Communications, 1988.

Crow, Thomas, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996.

Elley, Derek, "Rhythm & Truths," *Films & Filming*, vol. 20, no. 9, issue 237, June 1974, pp. 30-6.

Evans, Gary, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

Hanson, Matt, *Reinventing Music Video: Next-Generation Directors, Their Inspiration and Their Work*, London: Focal Press, 2006.

Houle, Michel, Jacques Leduc, and Lucien Hamelin, "Entretien," *Cinéastes du Québec 8: Denys Arcand*, 1971.

La Rochelle, Réal, "McLaren et la musique: le 'compositeur incomplet,'" *24 Images*, no. 120, December 2004 – January 2005, pp. 27-9.

Mackenzie, Scott, *Screening Québec: Québécois Moving Images, National Identity, and the Public Sphere*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004.

McLaren, W.N., "Experiences of an Amateur Filmmaker," *Journal of Film Preservation*, vol. XXV, no. 53, November 1996 (1937).

Marshall, Bill, *Quebec National Cinema*, Montreal and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

Millière, Guy, *Québec: Chant des possibles...*, Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1978.

Tanguay, Michel, "René Jodoin: Quand un peintre prend le marteau," *l'Oeuvre de René Jodoin*, Montreal: NFB/ONF, 1999.

#### Filmography

##### *Chansons contemporaines:*

Bédard, Jean-Thomas, *La Ville*, 1970.

Coderre, Laurent, *Les Fleurs de macadam*, 1969.

Elnécavé, Viviane, *Notre jeunesse en auto-sport*, 1969.

Leduc, André, *Tout écartillé*, 1972.

Longpré, Bernard, *Tête en fleurs*, 1969.

Moretti, Pierre, *Cerveau gelé*, 1969.

Stutz, Roland, *Taxi*, 1969.

(all produced by René Jodoin)

*Chants populaires #1*, 1943.

*Chants populaires #2*, 1943.

*Chants populaires #3*, 1943.

*Chants populaires #4*, 1946.

*Chants populaires #5*, 1943.

*Chants populaires #6*, 1946.

(all produced by Norman McLaren)

*Let's All Sing Together #1*, 1944.  
*Let's All Sing Together #2*, 1944.  
*Let's All Sing Together #3*, 1944.  
*Let's All Sing Together #4*, 1945.  
*Let's All Sing Together #5*, 1945.  
*Let's All Sing Together #6*, 1945.  
 (all produced by Norman McLaren)

Arcand, Denys, *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, 1986.  
*On est au coton*, 1970/1976.  
*Québec: Duplessis et après*, 1972.

Brault, Michel, *Entre la mer et l'eau douce*, 1967.

Brault, Michel and Gilles Groulx, *Les Raquetteurs*, 1958.

Devlin, Bernard, *Les Brûlés*, 1957.

Dunning, George, *Cadet Roussel*, 1946.  
*Yellow Submarine*, 1968.

Fischinger, Oskar, *Hungarian Dance*, 1931.

Godard, Jean-Luc, *Pierrot le fou*, 1965.

Godbout, Jacques, *Fabienne sans son Jules*, 1964.

Groulx, Gilles, *24 heures ou plus...*, 1973.  
*Le Chat dans le sac*, 1964.  
*Où êtes-vous donc?*, 1969.

Jutra, Claude, *Félix Leclerc troubadour*, 1958.

Lefebvre, Jean Pierre, *Jusqu'au Coeur*, 1968.

McLaren, Norman, *Begone Dull Care*, 1949.  
*Camera Makes Whoopee*, 1934.  
*C'est l'aviron*, 1946.  
*A Chairy Tale*, 1957.  
*Hen Hop*, 1942.  
*Keep Your Mouth Shut*, 1944.  
*Là-haut sur ces montagnes*, 1946.  
*Mail Early*, 1941.  
*Le Merle*, 1958.  
*Neighbours*, 1952.  
*La Poulette grise*, 1947.  
*V for Victory*, 1941.

McLaren, Norman and René Jodoin, *Alouette*, 1944.  
*Spheres*, 1969.

Perrault, Pierre, *Pour la suite du monde*, 1962.

Shebib, Donald, *Goin' Down the Road*, 1970.