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NEW YORK

CLAUDE CHAMBERLAN IN NEW YORK

Interview with Claude Chamberlan of *Montréal's Festival du Nouveau Cinéma*. New York. June 1996



PHOTO: JACQUES DURESNE

Claude Chamberlan

Montréal's *Festival du Nouveau Cinéma* has charmed audiences on its home turf for 25 years, making it the longest running film and video festival in Canada. Under the leadership of director Claude Chamberlan, it combines adventurous programming with visionary showmanship, presents innovative and original works from the world of independent cinema, and creates new opportunities in video and multimedia — including the famous outdoor screenings, of which Chamberlan is a pioneer. Chamberlan is no stranger to New York. But this year, for the first time, he brought an abbreviated version of his festival to Manhattan. It took place from June 20 to 24 at the New York Film Academy, and included 25 US premieres out of a program of features, shorts and rooftop screenings. Chamberlan is an engaging guy with a large appetite for life tempered by a hipster's cool irony. He is soft spoken, with a bohemian casualness that masks the good business sense of an entrepreneur: both dreamy and realistic, visionary and bottom line, easy going and thorough. Chamberlan was obviously pleased with the first edition of his festival in New York, and looking forward to future projects.

This interview is the product of two conversations we had in the "Lina Wertmuller" studio and the "Orson Welles" conference room of the Film Academy, a grand old building with marble staircases, spacious lobbies, walnut fittings and a reluctant air of faded glory that reminded me of Chamberlan himself.

Steven Kaplan: *What is the genesis of your festival in Montréal, and why are you bringing it here to New York?*

Claude Chamberlan: The genesis is for the same reason that it comes here — to show films and videos that have something different to say. I'm interested in independent productions with a personal point of view in terms of documentary and fiction, no matter what the length.

S.K.: *How does this differ from the Montréal Film Festival that takes place in August?*

C.C.: that's a more commercial festival. It follows the same principle as Cannes, and all those other big festivals. I don't. First of all, I don't present any commercial films, because there are already venues for that. Also, the spirit is very different, because I do a lot of outdoor showings, special screenings, and I show video. This is the first edition in New York, the first small effort. We have only 25 films



Kiarostami, Kimiavi, Breillat, Depardon, Longuine, Denis, Costa-Gavras, Ruiz, *À propos de Nice, la suite*, France, 1995.

and videos here as opposed to Montréal, where we have 225. In Montréal we have eight theaters and three or four outdoor venues, which I eventually want to do in New York — in Union Square or other neighborhoods. This all needs to be explored.

S.K. : *I heard that you screened a film in a swimming pool in Montréal.*

C.C. : I did a Dive-In, an underwater screening. Not over the water but under the water, with speakers under the water. It was a ten minute show.

S.K. : *The film was projected underwater ?*

C.C. : Yes, against a screen that we managed to submerge.

S.K. : *And the audience was in the water ?*

C.C. : Yes, with masks on. Scuba. It was twenty people at a time. We started screening at seven in the evening and ended at midnight. We were sponsored by an aquarium. We also did screenings in a peep show. I approached the owner and suggested that out of 60 porn channels, let's program 15 with independent films.

S.K. : *You programmed your films into the individual booths ?*

C.C. : Yes, and people could switch. When they went above channel 15 it was porno. But that was up to them. It was a very private screening situation (laughs).

S.K. : *Would you like to use peep shows in New York ?*

C.C. : In New York there is plenty to do. Financially, what I managed to do this year are the rooftop screenings. I wanted to do something in Union Square but I didn't have the time or the money. But I'll do it next year. I'll be more organized. Normally I announce my events a month to a month and a half in advance. I know the market well. In Montréal this year we had 100,000 people in attendance. It was three times the box office this year over last year.

S.K. : *To what do you attribute this dramatic growth ?*

C.C. : I always try new things. I'm known for that. First of all I changed the date. It has been in October for 22 years. I moved it to June to make it more accessible to people. Secondly, the doors of the sponsors are more open when you have 50,000 people on the street. That's evident. The third thing was to create a niche for independent films and videos. Normally in June in Montréal they used to open

only with blockbusters. They let Hollywood do what it wanted : occupy Christmas, occupy the summer. I said that doing a June festival will open it up for summer screenings of independent films from Europe or America or whatever. The festival will permit that. And that's exactly what's happening this year. It took us three years to get there, and there were a lot of sceptics who said we couldn't fight it, but quite the contrary has happened. We launched about eight to ten independent films this year. In terms of programming I have an expanded view of what is cinema and what is video. I'm interested in many subjects and many forms of expression. And my door is open to other programmers. That's what makes for a richness of programming. It creates an osmosis. In New York this year we have introduced Peter Wintonick and his Virtual Film Festival. We have a general commitment to documentary and fiction film, but pay special attention to literature, theater, the performing arts. I'll give you an example. Pina Bausch (the German dancer/choreographer) was first made known through cinema — the films of Werner Schroeter and others. At first it travels through film and then, five years later, Pina Bausch comes to America. That's what independent film does for artists in different fields, and for many writers and theater people.

S.K. : *How did you make the selection for your first New York festival ? I noticed that the opening film, André Forcier's Au clair de la lune (1982), is billed as a Québec classic.*

C.C. : I'm very fond of Forcier's work, and the film has never been shown in New York. So too with many other Canadian and Québec films.

S.K. : *Like Robert Lepage's Le confessional, your closing night film, which I saw last year in Toronto, and which still has no American release.*

C.C. : It will, in January 1997.

S.K. : *Really. Who's the distributor ?*

C.C. : *Artificial Eye*, which is based in London, but just established an office in New York. *Le confessional* is one more indication that there's something going on in Québec—an entree. Québec is coming out of staring at its navel, and becoming more international. That's one of the reasons I've come to New York. And I've brought ten to fifteen people with me from Québec.



C.C. : Yes. So there's an exchange between the American public and the Canadian public on an organizational level. And I'm not doing this just for the festival in June but with other projects throughout the year in New York.

S.K. : *Was it difficult to mount the New York festival so close on the heels of Montréal ?*

C.C. : It could have been easier. But the problem was not the scheduling. It was simply a matter of money. I think it will be earlier next year. You learn from experience. I was expecting money from the Canadian and Québec governments and it didn't come. They said that due to times of economic crisis I should just stick to Montréal. I said on the contrary this is exactly the moment to go to New York. When I came up with this idea of New York, everybody — filmmakers, producers, distributors, spectators — thought it was great. The Québec government said nothing at first, then asked why not do it in Paris. Why not maintain the Francophone connection. I said you can choose somebody to do it in Paris. Me, I'm not interested. I want to do it in New York. I've been working in New York for 25 years. I like the people here very much, and I think we can work out a good exchange. My position is that I do it on a shoestring budget. \$60,000 is nothing. And I asked them for just a kickoff of

\$10,000, after which I would never bother them. Because I work a lot on sponsorship, on private funds. I have the Laurentian Bank as a sponsor and also Domtar, which gave me the paper to publish the catalogue. It opens things up for other ventures. What I do in Montréal is fun. The notion is to have fun at what you do. You saw it the first night here (Note : there was a rooftop party). Everyone was enjoying themselves. For me this is a very important aspect of the festival. The films, the sex, the love. If there is not in no interchange, then I'm interested in doing it. But there is also the business end. Yesterday we screened Heather Frise and Yelcrow Ripper's *Bones Of The Forest*, a very good film. There were some technical problems at first, but we managed to get through. The director of the NYU Environmental Festival was there, saw the film and took right on the spot. I've been interconnecting people my whole life. And also interconnecting Québec with the world.

S.K. : *You seem to have longterm personal attachments with the filmmakers that you show in your festivals.*

C.C. : It's a good thing and a bad thing. Raymond (Depardon) and Wim (Wenders) and Jim (Jarmusch) and Spike (Lee) — I get to love those guys. They become a sort of family. I have a hospitable nature and it is reflected in the



Raymond Depardon, *Caught in the Act (Délits flagrants)*, France, 1995.

festival. The people who work for me are also very hospitable, and friendships develop. It's funny — it happens a lot with drivers. Wenders developed a strong friendship with his driver Luc Carron (the poet, who unfortunately died last year of AIDS), and invited Luc to stay at his apartment for three months while he was on a shoot. The tough part is that if one of these director does a bad film one year, it's very difficult to refuse.

S.K. : *How about Raymond Depardon ?*

C.C. : My first involvement with Depardon was with his photography, which I liked very much. He is like the French Robert Frank.

S.K. : *I was comparing him to Fred Wiseman because of his obvious fascination with institutions. His previous documentaries are set in a police station and in a hospital emergency room and Délits flagrants, which is in the current festival, is a cinema vérité on judicial process. But maybe he's more like Frank in his attitude, his bohemianism.*

C.C. : Exactly. he's very rock'n'roll, like us, so we understand each other. When we talk, there's this proximity, even if we haven't spoken for five years. I have the same experience with Marguerite Duras. There is complicity. I stand for people like Duras, Cassavetes, Jarmusch, Wenders,

Peter Greenaway, Jane Campion. I first showed her shorts, then when she went on to make features I showed these. The same thing with Jarmusch.

S.K. : *What was your first Jarmusch film ? Did you show Permanent Vacation ?*

C.C. : Yes, and then *Stranger than paradise* when it was still a 30 minute short. He was looking for financing for the rest, to do a feature. And they wrote a very prestigious article in *Le Devoir* saying that this was the emergence of a new American cinema. I know that Jarmusch showed this article when he was trying to raise money from German TV or whomever.

S.K. : *What is your history with Wenders ?*

C.C. : When the festival started in 1971 we were pushing 16mm film production because this was the format that most official festivals were refusing. Then by 1978-79 we found out that even a lot of 35mm films were being tossed aside by the official festivals. That's why we opened up to any format — super 8, video. So in the case of Wenders our first real connection was after *Alice In The Cities* and *Kings Of The Road*. It happened really with Nick (Ray)'s movie, *Lightning Over Water*. Wenders has sort of adopted our festival. He's on the *Comité des Sages*, the

Wisdom Committee (*laughs*). And this year he offered us the world premiere of his film *Les lumières de Berlin*.

S.K. : *That film was in your Montréal festival, but not in New York.*

C.C. : No, because it's in French. Also, some film programmers prefer to do different marketing for the States, so I don't have all the films from Montréal in any case.

S.K. : *Most film programmers do the International circuit from Sundance to Cannes to Toronto, and that's how they find films for their festivals. Is that how you work ?*

C.C. : I attend many festivals small, medium and large. Also I stay in cities. You can go to a lot of screenings without being at a festival. When you know there is a production you can get a commitment before the other festivals. That's the usual fights among the film programmers of the world. I'm very lucky, I must say. I get the best of what's out there. Canada is not a big market, let's not kid ourselves, but they like the relaxed atmosphere. At the same time, I provide a person who takes charge of the liaison with the TV buyers, the programmers and the distributors. We do that on a very serious level. Most independent filmmakers come through our festival, and we know how difficult it is for them. Right now the situation is tough. We've lost a lot of distributors who had a keen interest in those kinds of films. Economically speaking, it's tough in Canada. The government also made cuts in grants to the arts, the same as in the United States.

S.K. : *I understand the Toronto festival has been seriously curtailed this year with regard to government money.*

C.C. : Yes, but they have a business structure not to be believed, let me tell you. They are super organized on an administrative level. That's the Anglo-Saxon thing. In Québec it's more Latin.

S.K. : *Your year round project is running the Cinema Parallele on St. Laurent. How does the programming there compare with the festivals ?*

C.C. : It's never the same, but it's always cutting edge filmmaking and video. We're tougher in our selection process for the festival. For the Parallele we're more easy going, in the sense that it's open to Québec distributors. Even if I'm against a film there, it will play at the Parallele. I have a greater flexibility, although it's tough sometimes to run a film that you really don't like, because we're in an exceptional situation. There are only two theaters left in Québec showing independent films, us and the Cinema du Parc. The festival has always used independent exhibitors. We rent from them to encourage their business.

S.K. : *You also have close tie with the New York indie community ?*

C.C. : I know them all. In fact, I made an understanding with the Lincoln Center people that if there's a film that they want to premiere in September, I won't show it in New York. And similar arrangements with other New York programmers and festivals. It's alright because I don't intend to do a big thing here. A fun thing, five or six days, and that's all. Because the main event is in Montréal. We will keep our New York effort small — 25 to 40 films and videos. But it will be very much fun. I'll introduce the outdoor screens in the neighborhoods and also the Dive-Ins, the films that will show underwater.

S.K. : *Where will you do that in New York ?*

C.C. : At a public bath, the same as I did in Montréal. And I will do it only once. I will find other ideas. You can use subways that are not active. There are many locations. For Patricia Rozema's first film, *I hear the mermaids singing*, I did a big party in an aquarium, and the director of the aquarium let the penguins out. There were penguins everywhere. I like to do things like that. So let's say that out of 25 programs next year in New York, about four or five will be special events. Next year it's Montréal, New York and then Juan-les-Pins on the Côte d'Azur. Their Ministry of Tourism studied film festivals from all over the world — about 400 — and they chose us. They wanted a crazy festival. It will be fantastic, because besides using the theaters that are there I'll do special screenings on the Mediterranean. Juan-les-Pins is well known for its jazz festival, and they want something exquisite for their film festival. I've already gone there, and their director of tourism has come to Montréal. I'm going back with my artistic director, François Aubry, who did the Dive-Ins in Montréal. He's a wizard, and this time he'll be properly paid. Because the big difference in Juan-les-Pins is that they're paying for everything. As with many other people over the years, Aubry's collaboration has been very generous. It is a very big challenge, the Côte d'Azur. It's another way of looking at festivals. I don't want the normal way : screening, press conference, blah blah. I like to develop other kinds of marketing. Because most festivals are at a stagnant level.

S.K. : *Stagnant ?*

C.C. : Yeah, because it's nothing new, merely a turnover of itself.

S.K. : *Well, what would seem to be different from year to year are the films being screened.*

C.C. : That's of basic importance, but I say that since we're in an era of celebrations, you need to develop new marketing tools towards the young people, or else they'll stay in front of their TV. It's as simple as that. If we're to keep cinema alive we have to keep finding new marketing ideas for the films. That's what I do. I'm just part of the chain, developing new ways of approaching film. This is the eternal challenge. But there is no absolute truth of how to organize a festival. I welcome all kinds of different approaches. I say : do not forget life, as a festival is a celebration of body, mind and soul. Beyond the films and videos themselves, it's also a human experience. I even encourage people to sleep during a screening. If they feel tired, they shouldn't force themselves awake. It's a very good place to sleep. Not only the public, but even a filmmaker who's seeing another's work. One should not be offended, because it's a good, human thing to sleep. I do it myself. Before I used to take films so seriously that you must, absolutely, stay awake. Not anymore. Because fifty percent of a festival is the meetings between people. If you develop a love affair, if that night you're going to fuck, that means it's a very good festival. Or else, what's the use of living ? It's not just the wheeling and dealing of cinema. It's the wheeling and dealing of life.

STEVEN KAPLAN