

Between Looking and Gesturing: Pierre Hébert's Concept of '*Animation d'Observation*'¹

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Abstract

The French Canadian filmmaker Pierre Hébert expression 'animation d'observation' (literally, observation animation) first appears within the context of the production of his film *Etienne et Sara* (1984) and is only employed there and during the implementation of the following film project: *The Subway, Songs and Dances of the Inanimate world / Le Metro, Chants et Danses du Monde Inanimé* (1985). At that time, Hébert's poetics go through what is perhaps their most important transformation. *Etienne et Sara*, started out being the last in a series of films whose project should have been resolved in a collation of multiple graphic and moving expressions, i.e. within the scope of what we commonly call the techniques of the animated film. However, following Pierre Hébert's meeting with the Belgian poet Serge Meurant, it became evident that it was more than just a film. In *Confitures de Gagaku* (1986), the following production to *The Subway, Songs and Dances of the Inanimate world / Le Metro, Chants et Danses du Monde Inanimé*, where for the first time he is animating in the presence of the spectators, in dialogue with the saxophonist Jean Derome, the film already appears clearly as a manifestation – albeit an autonomous one – of a project which is formed in a situation of open frontiers in the collision of languages, in a precise time and space. In it the author exhibits and lays claim to the origin of the film for the body, alive and feeling, of its maker, thereby questioning the ideological workings of the whole film making machinery and protocols. In this essay I will try to explain the author's intention when he invented and then used such verbal device within the context of his work and, broadly, that of contemporary animation.

Whoever attempts to address the simultaneously theoretical and artistic cinematographic work of Pierre Hébert soon realises that it is marked by a permanent restlessness. Although it is possible to find recurring elements, both at the level of content and in the coding methods, as well as points of familiarity between some of the films, it is clear that Hébert's trajectory seems never to have settled on any formal solutions, whether technical, narrative or other. This observation is rendered self evident when we compare the body of work realised under the *aegis* of the National Film Board, of Canada, with that developed later, after his leaving. In the most recent of Hébert's work, there is a leap, an apparently incomprehensible difference that brings us to the point of actually questioning its status as cinema, or alternatively, and adopting the point of view raised by his work, the current dominant conception of cinema itself. What Pierre Hébert is doing now is something where feeling and gesturing bodies (his own and that of spectators, musicians, dancers, or singers) may be said to dwell between languages and technologies, with the effect that the

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work is experienced as a sentient presence. Hence the notion of 'living cinema', with animated films performed live on stage or among spectators and always in dialogue with other artists.

It is my conviction that this transformation happened through the use of a verbal device invented by Hébert himself: '*Animation d'observation*'. In this essay, I will try to explain when this transformation in Hébert's work took place and how was produced. I intend to establish a hypothesis that allows for an understanding of the body of his film and speculative work as a coherent evolution and, at the same time, pinpoint the moment of change.

Introducing Pierre Hébert

Before we examine this particular transformation in detail, it is important to provide a background of Pierre Hébert's previous work. During his education in anthropology at the University of Montréal in the 1960's, Hébert managed to make a few small independent films. At the same time he was practicing engraving at the '*Atelier libre de recherche graphique*' with Richard Lacroix. The gesture of scratching onto a surface, which is at the essence of this technique, will remain the foundation of all his written and cinematic questioning through film.

In 1965, Hébert joined the National Film Board of Canada's animation studio, following his interest in Norman McLaren's approach towards filmmaking. His first film there was the experimental work, *Op Hop – Hop Op* (1967), which was awarded the grand prize for short films at the Canadian Film Festival in 1967. Always looking for new techniques, Hébert studied computer animation at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn in 1967, a project which resulted in the film, *Autour de la Perception / Around Perception* (1968). Hébert's films soon began to be less abstract and to convey a social message (*Père Noël, Père Noël / Santa Claus is Coming Tonight*, 1974), and to address political issues, through humor (*Le Corbeau et le Renard*, 1969), later becoming more specific, denouncing unemployment (*Entre Chiens et Loup*, 1978) and war (*Memories of War / Souvenirs de Guerre*, 1982). His preferred animation technique was scratching images directly onto the film emulsion, although he occasionally used paper cutouts and sometimes a combination of the two techniques also with live-action film recordings and photography.

Wanting to renew his craft and broaden the audience for his work, suddenly Hébert started exploring new technologies and unusual filmmaking attitudes. The birth of his son, Étienne, triggered a new approach, more intimate, for which he developed a new poetic process in dialogue with other artists. In 1984, in 'confrontation' with Belgian poet, Serge Meurant, and Canadian musician, René Lussier, Hébert made *Étienne et Sara*, mirroring his experience as father and artist.

Initiating a collaboration with artists from different fields such as music and literature, Hébert will then start to give live, improvisational animation performances, first in Canada and then later in the United States and Europe, some of the most notable being the European tour of *La Symphonie interminable* (1985), a film-music performance done in collaboration with musicians Jean Derome, Robert M. Lepage and René Lussier. In the same mode, but back in Quebec, he performed *Chants et danses du monde inanimé / Songs and Dances of the Inanimate World: The Subway* with the same musicians, and *Adieu Léonard! / Goodbye Leonardo!* (1987), created specially for the Leonardo da Vinci exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

What Pierre Hébert is doing today *is* cinema and *is* animation but it is being done in a way that has little to do with the predominant practices and concepts of cinema that we have become used to, although it must be acknowledged that cinema technology and the industry in general are no longer adhering to the same old protocols and standards. Contemporary society is vastly different from that industrial society which gave rise to the development of cinema. Hébert's recent work affects an astonishing coherence within the context of contemporary artistic practices, thereby forcing us to reconsider the norms of cinematographic production. His work presents us with the most varied circles of activity — international art, music, dance encounters and displays — reclaiming all languages and technologies, putting them in collision without ever rejecting the origins of his work at that particular point, from which all animated films grow and cinema is questioned.

In the process of questioning the previously unquestioned technical means and languages of cinema, Hébert had to establish distance from the concepts, protocols and routines of cinema, while avoiding the risk of falling into schematism. For this it was necessary that Hébert's work be anchored in something other than the terms of the change itself. The term '*animation d'observation*' was used by Hébert to categorize his production approach during the years 1984 and 1985, a period when his work was already going beyond the traditional idea of cinema. Once the defining change was accomplished, he forgot about the term. By then, the thrust of his work was already going far beyond the scope of film festivals and studios. His feature film, *La Plante Humaine* (1996), appears to be a statement closing his contract with a traditional kind of film animation, a poetic attitude from which he had become emancipated. After this break from traditional techniques, Hébert also left the National Film Board of Canada and what was already a bright and successful career as a director, producer and head of studio.

Concept of '*animation d'observation*' and its context of use

The expression, '*animation d'observation*' — literally, observation animation — first appears within the context of the production of the film *Étienne et Sara* (1984). It is implemented and further developed in the project that followed, namely, *Le Metro, Chants et Danses du monde inanimé / Songs and Dances of the Inanimate World: The Subway* (1985). During this time, Pierre Hébert's poetics goes through what is perhaps its most important transformation. In the next production in the series, *Confitures de Gagaku* (1986), Hébert is animating in the presence of the spectators for the first time, and in dialogue with the saxophonist Jean Derome. Here film already appears as a manifestation — albeit an autonomous one — of a project which is formed in a situation of open frontiers in the collision of languages, in a precise time and space.

In order to explain the concept *animation d'observation* in Pierre Hébert's work, I include the following quotations from the production notes of the film *Étienne et Sara*:

A calligraphy on the body of my son. Scratched on film and graffiti on paper, in small format, almost black and white, a rough animation, 'observation animation' on the minute to minute (as we say "day to day") life of a 16-month-old child. Hence, a happy poem with a certain gravity about the ageing of the human body (Forget 1983).²

From the technical point of view, I want to explore the relationship between the animated subject and the likewise animated space, establishing a tension between the lines taken in their autonomous plastic existence, spread out over the screen's surface and, at times, on the limit of optical explosion, and these same lines taken in their representative function, the same tension linking and opposing representation of the subject and representation of the space. [...] The subject matter of the film is therefore the difficulty of simultaneously considering our children and the world, the affirmation of the desire to live and the discomfort of living with sang-froid in the face of chaos, the effort not to turn away one's eyes. The third birth is, therefore, my own and it is never resolved (I myself, like Étienne, with a still diffused identity, in the face of a still vague world vision, in a still fragmented time-span) (Hébert 1984).³

The expression '*observation animation*' was also used during the production of *The Subway* begun in 1984 and presented in 1985. In the proposal presented by the author to the National Film Board of Canada, one can read the following:

² «Une calligraphie sur le corps de mon fils. En gravure sur pellicule et en graffiti sur papier, en petit format, presque en noir et blanc, une animation brute, "animation d'observation" sur la vie minute à minute (comme on dit "au jour le jour") d'un enfant de 16 mois. Donc un poème joyeux et d'une certaine gravité sur le vieillissement des corps humains.»

³ «D'un point de vue technique, je veux explorer le rapport entre sujet animé et espace également animé en faisant agir une tension entre les traits pris dans leur existence plastique autonome, épars sur la surface de l'écran et parfois à la limite de l'éclatement optique, et ces mêmes traits pris dans leur fonction représentative, la même tension liant et opposant représentation du sujet et représentation de l'espace. [...] «Le propos du film, c'est donc la difficulté de ce regard simultané sur nos enfants et sur le monde, l'affirmation de la volonté et du désarroi de vivre de sang froid face aux chaos, l'effort de ne pas détourner le regard. La troisième naissance est donc plutôt la mienne et n'est jamais résolue (moi-même comme Étienne à l'identité encore éparse, face à une vision du monde encore dispersée, dans une durée encore fragmentée).»

Theme: observation of the metro, or rather, observation of the people on the metro.

[This theme] follows on from the research for my previous work: it makes use of the resources of animation to create representations of the most common situations in everyday life, in order to transfigure them, thereby provoking in the spectator a different viewpoint. Thus, above and beyond this effort of 'observation animation' (as one might say observation drawing), it deals with attributing a metaphorical and expressive representation to the aggressive relations between people in the public places in large cities ('aggression' in this context is taken as being the exacerbated refusal of any relation). In this sense, the metro becomes an interesting framework: people who don't know each other meet in a closed space and are thrown into a tunnel at full speed. Together they go to some/no place in a completely abstract space in the absence of any natural landscape or even pre-existing space (there are windows in the metro, but nothing to see). The bodies immobilised in poses and the blank looks express this extreme aggression which is not the reaching out for a certain contact, but the refusal of all contact, an attempt to wipe out the other or to wipe out the self before the other. This triad of immobility/aggression/abstract space thus constitutes the starting point and the connection lead of my work (Hébert n.d.).⁴

Conversation of languages

Étienne et Sara (1984) started out as the last in a series of films whose project should have been resolved in a collation of multiple graphic and moving expressions; that is, within the scope of what we commonly call the techniques of the animated film. However, following Pierre Hébert's meeting with the poet, Serge Meurant, it became evident that this project was turning out to be more than just a film. In fact, the project generated a film and a book. The results of this collaboration emerge as autonomous and inseparable manifestations of the original experience and transcend, in an obvious way, the normal production expectations. Hébert envisages an art form that materializes from the collision between poetry and film (1984c) — which does not exclude the suggestion of a similar relationship with music created 'in parallel', as he states in a flyer (1984b), and presented at the same level as the other two — and which sets out a space of open relations between different expressive media, as a place from which a new poetics will emerge.

⁴ « **Thématique:** observation du métro, ou plutôt observation des gens dans le métro. Cela va dans le sens de la poursuite de mon travail antérieur: mettre à profit les ressources de l'animation pour fabriquer des représentations des situations les plus ordinaires de la vie quotidienne pour les transfigurer et induire le spectateur à y porter un regard différent. Ainsi, au-delà de cet effort "d'animation d'observation" (comme on dit dessin d'observation) il s'agira de donner une représentation métaphorique et expressive des rapports d'agressivité entre les gens dans les lieux publics des grandes villes (« agressivité » comprise ici comme un refus exacerbé de tout rapport). En ce sens le métro est un cadre intéressant : des gens qui ne se connaissent pas sont réunis dans un espace fermé et sont lancés à toute vitesse dans un tunnel. Ensemble, ils vont quelque part/nulle part dans un espace totalement abstrait en retrait de tout paysage naturel ou même de tout espace préexistant (il y a des fenêtres dans le métro mais rien à voir). Des corps immobilisés dans des poses et des regards figés expriment cette agressivité extrême qui n'est pas recherche d'un contact quelconque mais refus de tout contact, tentative d'annulation de l'autre ou de s'annuler soi-même face à l'autre. Cette triade immobilité/agression/espace abstrait sera donc le point de départ et le fil conducteur de mon travail. ».

Étienne et Sara also marks the start of Pierre Hébert's production of theoretical texts in which he investigates the nature of the gesture of animating. For Hébert, theoretical discourse appears as a necessary means of confronting and distancing himself from the codification modes and models of received practice. It also provides a framework for reflection on his own practice as a filmmaker, and the support and distribution devices that are part of the film industry.

Surprised by the intensity of creative activity which informed the musical improvisation work for *Étienne et Sara*, Pierre Hébert later moved on to a collaboration project with the group *Chants et danses du monde inanimé*, made up of saxophonist Robert Lepage and guitar player René Lussier. In this project, entitled *Le Metro/The Subway*, the subway (metro) system of the city of Montreal is brought in as a formal, ambient element of the production. The decision to do this may be explained by the connection between the inspiration found in the noise of domestic machinery, which motivates the group, and the interest in public places and anonymous crowds which then concerned Pierre Hébert, and continues to do so. In this work, Hébert is interested in understanding the process of musical improvisation. His hope was that that in the course of the project, as he states it, the techniques employed by the musicians might impact on his own work. He accepts the challenge — which was made as an opening condition — of creating 'live', as an ensemble, together with the logistical production demands, whereby he was under an obligation to make a film lasting 10 to 15 minutes within a timeframe of 3 months. The confrontation — in a specified time and place — between different modes of creation, together with the imposition of rigorous and unusual production conditions, forced upon him a severe working discipline which he believed would set him free from his previous professional artistic conditioning and thus broaden his resource base.

For the first time in Hébert's work, *Le Metro/The Subway* addresses the difference between film as a 'showing', that is, as presented in its conventional, cinematic form and film considered as a cultural-artistic activity, presented on a stage one may say in a modified theatrical form. The formal justification of the project appears as part of a distribution strategy, planned by Pierre Hébert, with the aim of including his films in the regular programming of commercial cinema. On a wider scale, he imagines alternative ways of screening animation films, with consequences for the attitudes of viewers and, obviously, in the customary nature of animated films.

However, the performance dynamic of *Le Metro/Subway* mainly brings a new dimension to film; namely, the consciousness that the author of the film has a body, that something passes between the exterior and the interior of that body, and that that passage, that obscure continuity, falters on the split imposed by devices of a technical and ideological nature which support the film-making apparatus.

Continuity

In a text written in 1985, the year of the public presentation of *Le Metro/The Subway*, Pierre Hébert examines the difference between the movement of the dancer's body in the act of dancing and that of the animator's — his own — in its own creative act. He defines the gap: there is no direct, literal relation between the gesture of the animator and the movement seen on the screen — "That which in me wears itself out speaking is not that which is understood"⁵. Is it nevertheless possible to establish a muscular, nervous contact with the spectator of animation cinema, which is essential to his idea of the aesthetic experience? How can he overcome the inadequacy between the forced gesture of the animator over his static drawing and the virtual, speculative movement which flickers on the screen?

Both Len Lye and Norman McLaren tackled the problem of the possibility of empathy via film. McLaren did this by propounding muscular memory to control the formal differences between successive images (1976-1978), along with the paucity of means for a greater proximity between the author and the film (1948). Len Lye addressed the same question by proclaiming the physiological development of a consciousness of movement, which could be discovered "through the brain in blood, organs, tissues and nerves" (Lye, Riding, 1935). Movement should never be understood as a formal, external aspect of a mechanical character, but as an expression of physical existence itself, projected externally and seen as a manifestation of life. Consequently, the artistic activity always presupposes an experimental search for the intensity and parameters of the sentient unit: to touch the exterior object with the senses and to internalise it, integrating it into the substance of one's own body, would be to work the most primitive sensorial terrain, in order to prepare it for a poetic treatment.

But one may ask: with what means, and in what way? The very language that makes the work possible is also its obstacle. Its trustworthiness, as a system of correspondence relations, is based on its predictability. Language makes possible the communication and representation of concepts and objects, but, at the same time, it inhibits the experience of and reference to world states not foreseen in a semantic system, which depends upon a preceding codification of the perceptive experience. It imposes models for the recognition of reality and shapes cognitive, perceptual and sensuous apprehension according to conventional relations of correspondence and codification. For this reason, the reference of the work of art must always include the process of codification itself, along with the criticism of the devices which determine and regulate it.

In the case of animated film, this presupposes the examination of the manipulation processes for the graphic representation and for the continuity-discontinuity relation inherent to the composition of the illusion of movement. Above all, this critical position requires the questioning of the technical and ideological devices which are at the root of, and which support the language of the cinematic tradition.

⁵ «Ce qui en moi s'épuise à parler n'est pas ce qui est entendu.»

Now, this is impossible to do except from a marginal standpoint, excluded and unexpected, from which the false authority of the language is seen to be naked. This space appears, naturally, in the confrontation between expressions that do not overlap or translate between themselves, in no-man's land between expressive substances, where a neutral space of true conversation opens up and new perspectives on the world intercross. According to Hébert, such concepts and practices as 'contingency,' 'mistake' and 'improvisation' would all equally inform this spontaneous standpoint (1984c). It is thus that the expression '*animation d'observation*' appears as a creative strategy in the work process of Pierre Hébert at a time when he is searching for alternatives to the practices and models considered to be relevant and desirable at the heart of a cinema of animation, which is becoming more and more *technistic* and closed in upon itself. The confrontation with other languages and improvisation as a means of expression allows Pierre Hébert to place himself outside conventional animation procedures. Theoretical written discourse emerges as the making of intelligibility as a possibility; that is, the establishment of layers of sense, one on top of the other, which accumulates retroactively on the fringes of the creative process.

Through the analogy with the term, 'observation drawing', *animation d'observation* functions as a verbal device which allows the animation to be displaced to the real time and space of the animator, as a procedure of observation and spontaneous expression, without mediation, as if he were drawing movement and not images. The body of the animator would then appear, unequivocally, as the place between an exterior space which is internalised and an internal space which is externalised⁶ as the intense passage between that which modifies him and that which he is capable of expressing. Proclaiming his practice as *animation d'observation*, the author physically positions his look and his gesture *in* the world. Improvised animation, directly scratched on the film in the presence of a public, completes the device thereby created, reaching out at the same time to the presence of the spectator's body, thus involving him in the flux of energy which pours into a poetic process.

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⁶ This idea is taken from *The Book of Disquiet* by Fernando Pessoa, a reading which also marked the work of Pierre Hébert.

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