

# Dossier | On the attack: The cultural guérilla of Cinéma Abattoir

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## **On the attack: The cultural guérilla of Cinéma Abattoir**

**By Pierre Rannou**

In the very consensually driven Québécois film world Cinéma abattoir has the profile of a cultural guerrilla. Far from being a simple poetic formula, this expression is a perfect fit for the actions carried out by Pierre-Luc Vaillancourt over the past years under the Cinéma abattoir label. In fact, he dedicates a good part of his creative energy to developing this editorial platform that allows those who join it, be it just for one evening, to engage in a form of cultural resistance to consumerist society and its practices. Cinéma abattoir, which is an alternative cinema dissemination structure, spreads its actions through the organization of screening evenings and the publication of a DVD collection. For Vaillancourt this is an attempt to inject a convulsive barbarization, or a self-barbarization as Alain Brossat (1) calls it, into the anesthetized social body in order to jolt it with a reviving electroshock; a legitimate autoimmune defence of sorts. To participate in Cinéma abattoir's various

manoeuvres is to practice a certain form of cultural dissidence, to claim to represent an active minority and an inner sanctum of initiates practicing a kind of cult devoted to the radicalism of this deviance.

### **Occupying Dissemination Venues**

The operational territories of the Cinéma abattoir evenings are rarely that of cinema venues, since Vaillancourt prefers sites that are associated with the dissemination of alternative productions in the visual arts and music milieus (Seke's Gallery, Saint-Laurent des arts, L'envers, etc.). By proceeding in this manner he re-inscribes the films in the interstices of the underground networks, all the while obstinately reminding profit hungry merchants that film is above all a cultural matter. Taking this first, ideologically charged stance (2) does not, however, imply a complete rejection of traditional cinema distribution circuits, rather it leads one to reflect on the means used to partake in it and what dubious compromises this entails. It's in this spirit that Cinéma abattoir chose not to make prior arrangements and instead squatted the Montreal NFB cinema on St-Denis Street for one evening to project works offering a diversity of transgressive viewpoints. This tactic of re-appropriating a cultural territory confiscated to serve legitimizing bureaucratic ends, and to occupy it for the time of a screening, is the very example of the kind of cultural trench warfare one should encourage, and that furthermore helps to reinvigorate venues which would otherwise be left to fade away in a stultifying daily grind. (3)

Vaillancourt's other manoeuvres were to be just as destabilizing for cinema or event venue managers willing to collaborate in extreme film projections under the aegis of Cinéma abattoir. At Cinéma du Parc, made available to him after bitter negotiations (the virtues of the potlatch are not evident to all) he refused to limit his guests' interventions to the room and occupied the entrance hall, with the goal of pointing out that the difference does not only reside in the content but also in the form and means of film dissemination. The same concern to deconstruct the screening space also guided the Amour et terrorisme evening held in the context of the Festival du nouveau cinéma, as well as the presentation of a performance by Karl Lemieux assisted by Philippe Léonard. An event that consisted of a visual and audio exploration no longer simply limited to the screen, since it spread out into the Hydro-Québec agora space before continuing with a plastic-cinematographic intervention which totally diverted the screen as a support by choosing to use a prepared wall in its stead. (4)

### **A Demonic Program**

The Cinéma abattoir evenings are not solely limited to a questioning of the sites and apparatuses of film projection, they are above all an occasion to see works that are a cut above the pre-cooked fare of bland films one usually finds on the menu of Québécois cinemas. One need only take a look (however quick) at the films by the French director Catherine Corringer or the American Usama Alshaibi to see just how much fascinating aesthetic experimentation takes place in the world of transgressive cinema. Through

intelligently and sensitively developed programs gathering some of the most important names of underground experimental and transgressive cinema (Aryan Kaganof, Dyonisos Andronis, Breyer P-Orridge, Ben Russel, Ken Jacobs, to name a few), Vaillancourt seeks to stimulate the collective imaginary by feeding something other than the rawboned junk served up by the goodtime mongering cultural industries. How can one not be delighted by retrospectives dedicated to the Belgian director Roland Lethem, whose delicious *Comme le temps paxe vite* is hard to equal, or the American JX William, these veritable little cluster bombs intended to shake us up in our vapid routines? How to communicate one's surprise upon discovering a double-bill including *Graphyty* (1969) by Jean-Pierre Bouyxou and *Chant sauvage : le Ménestrel* (2007) by Chaab Mahmoud, two works which are diametrically opposed on a formal level, but united, beyond time, by an analogous subversive approach?

Vaillancourt also deploys his offensive forces by enlisting singular Québécois works such as *The Man We Want to Anger*. Kenneth Anger, *Aleister Crowley*, Cinema, *Magick and the Occult* by CA CA CA, a documentary that is aesthetically on par with the works of the artists that are the film's subject, or the stimulating works by Étienne O'Leary's, a remarkable filmmaker from the 1970s whose films are too rarely presented and which had become invisible before this memorable evening last July 5th. Needless to say there is the succession of local filmmakers (Karl Lemieux, Pat Tremblay, Serge de Cotret, Frédérick Maheux, Mitch Davis, Philippe Léonard, etc.) who were given an opportunity to reach an audience by way of the cinematographic shrapnel that the *Cinéma abattoir* programs represent.

Vaillancourt's endeavours to spearhead underground attacks have led him to spread the offensive beyond the Québécois territory by organizing programs that are polar opposites of the efforts undertaken by the Québécois and Canadian governments to internationally promote a professional and mature image of our film industry, while all too often abandoning any semblance of originality. In this regard, the European expedition under the code name *Hérétiques : cinémas iconoclastes québécois*, which did not go unnoticed as it passed through Kiel, Lübeck, Hamburg, Paris, Lausanne, Nantes, Berlin, Krakow and Amsterdam, was truly a last-ditch struggle. A real sabotage operation of this vain commercial promotion, this tour at times really began to look like guerrilla warfare.

Vaillancourt's ultimate affront to the snug Québécois film milieu is the micropublishing of DVDs that benefit from two commercially non-viable elements: an anthology of short films and an aesthetics that's light years from classic narrative cinema. With three titles *L'érotisme*, *Incarnation* and *À rebours*, he has thus managed to carve out a special place for himself as part of the transgressive cinema enclave, rallying both experimental film buffs and extreme cinema enthusiasts around the same banner. (5) Here too, the choice of works is incredibly pertinent and the cohesiveness of title groupings demonstrates a real concern to display each work in its proper context. Furthermore, in deciding to forego the official sanctioning bodies, such as the Régie du cinéma du Québec, by no longer submitting his DVDs to the organization's henchmen so that they can emit a rating certificate and small

stickers clearing it for commercial distribution in Québec, Cinéma abattoir has taken its fight to another terrain. In choosing to bypass the system and to go underground with internet sales, he is internationalizing his struggle (his buyers live in various European and Asian countries, while others are holding the fort in some video stores in France, Greece, Holland, Finland and the US by making it a point of honour to distribute these DVDs) and showing all those interested that our home-grown cinema will always be welcome abroad so long as one does not fiddle with its distinct flavours and aromas—between a whiff of holiness and Mephistophelean exhalations.

[Translated from the French by Bernard Schütze]

#### NOTES

1. Alain Brossat, *Le grand dégoût culturel* (Paris: Seuil, 2008). See p. 71 in particular.
2. Though the economic question certainly plays a role in the venue selection, this fails to account for the financial structure upon which Cinéma abattoir is based, i.e. it receives no subsidies or operating grants, and refuses to submit to the dictates and dictatorship of official public funding agencies. The balanced governance of its activities thus depends on ticket sales, but above all on Vaillancourt's financial sacrifice, making each event a sort of potlatch to which friends and sympathizers are invited; a fact that shifts the question from the economic to the symbolic domain.
3. In the face of possible reprisals by back-alley conspirators, since Cinéma abattoir had called for its flock to gather behind the NFB building for its first DVD launch, the management of the federal organization was to hire a security guard to patrol the halls of the building and ensure that no intruder secretly enter the fortress now besieged by rebellious young spirits.
4. This mixture of film screenings and performances is at the heart of many Cinéma abattoir evenings. As of the first evening in 2005, live painting sessions were part of the activities. Over the years the sessions were to include film screening performances, video performances with Istvan Kantor for instance, the integration of installations or hybrid evenings of musical experimentation.
5. Last May, Cinéma abattoir was invited to participate in the Paris-based Salon des éditeurs indépendants de cinéma which is organized by Cinémas hors circuits.