

What's out there? Des étudiants en cinéma parlent de leur avenir

Propos recueillis par Sylvain Duguay



Post-partum de Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre

La société québécoise retire une grande fierté des succès de ses cinéastes, autant sur le plan local qu'international. Mais d'où viennent ces cinéastes? Où apprennent-ils à maîtriser les complexités techniques qui permettent à leurs œuvres de voir le jour? Il fut un temps, pas encore tout à fait révolu, où les aptitudes filmiques se passaient de maître à apprenti (ne parle-t-on pas encore d'une « guild » des réalisateurs?) D'autres institutions, comme l'ONF, ont contribué à former toute une génération de cinéastes. Qu'en est-il, aujourd'hui, de la formation par le biais des collèges (privés ou publics) et des universités? Comment le milieu perçoit-il les diplômés de ces programmes? Et surtout, comment les étudiants dans ces programmes entendent-ils leur relation avec le cinéma québécois?

Afin d'avoir un point de vue de l'intérieur, j'ai réuni quelques étudiants du programme de Maîtrise en beaux-arts, option Production cinématographique (MFA Film Production) de l'Université Concordia afin de recueillir leur réflexion à propos de leurs relations avec les différentes institutions du cinéma québécois. L'entrevue s'est déroulée à la fois en anglais et en français, et c'est telle quelle que j'en rends compte...

S.D. : Pour débiter, j'aimerais que vous m'expliquiez, en quelques mots, votre cheminement artistique.

My name is **KARA BLAKE** and I came to Montréal after three years of doing post production in Toronto. Previous to this, I had studied at Ryerson in the undergraduate Film Production program. I primarily make short experimental films, usually working with smaller formats like super 8, and I also do some hand processing. I like to work on a small scale in general. I find that this gives me control over all aspects of my practice. Coming back to school after spending three years in the industry has been really good for me; I enjoy being able to focus on my own work as a filmmaker.

Mon nom est **MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE**. J'ai fait le baccalauréat en animation (*Film Animation*) à l'Université Concordia et, tout de suite après, j'ai commencé la maîtrise en production. Je travaille en animation et en production, soit séparément ou les deux à la fois. Je viens tout juste de sortir du système universitaire et je m'aperçois que faire des films à l'extérieur de l'université est plus difficile que je ne m'y attendais – c'est vraiment très laborieux...

Je m'appelle **KORBETT MATTHEWS**. Je suis originaire d'Ottawa, et je suis venu à Montréal après avoir étudié la théorie du cinéma à Carleton. Au début je ne voulais pas être cinéaste : je voulais être architecte, mais je n'avais pas vraiment les qualifications scientifiques et mathématiques requises. Alors j'ai décidé de m'attaquer au cinéma pour faire sortir les images que j'avais dans la tête. J'ai commencé à étudier la production à Concordia à la fin de la vingtaine, après avoir voyagé en Amérique Centrale et en Asie. Mon premier projet ne m'a pas complètement satisfait, mais mon deuxième film a connu une meilleure réception et m'a redonné confiance. J'ai alors décidé d'entreprendre le tournage d'un documentaire à l'étranger. Je travaille toujours à l'étranger lors du tournage de mes films. Je cherche à intégrer une dimension géographique et anthropologique à mon cinéma. Les autres cultures m'intéressent beaucoup. J'aime aussi expérimenter avec la pellicule. Je suis retourné aux études pour la maîtrise parce que je souhaitais compléter le diplôme final en beaux-arts. Je me disais que je devais faire le travail de toute façon, alors pourquoi ne pas le faire ici, histoire d'avoir le diplôme et de m'ouvrir des portes pour l'avenir. J'ai travaillé à temps plein pendant toute la durée de ma maîtrise. Je ne m'identifie pas comme étudiant par rapport à l'industrie. Je ne pense pas que les films que je fais soient des films étudiants. Je fais les films parce que je veux les faire, et je passe dans le système universitaire parce que ça m'aide à les faire. Or, je les ferais tout de même si j'étais à l'extérieur du système universitaire. Le statut d'étudiant n'est pas important pour moi. Ce sont les films – le résultat final – qui sont importants.

My name is **CLIFF CAINES**, I'm a student finishing my Master's thesis at Concordia University – I should finish in 2004. I began my studies in Toronto at the Ontario College of Art and Design with a thesis centered around integrated media. That was a four year programme. I do a lot of work that encompasses film studies, philosophy and film production. I work a lot in experimental fiction – I guess the word independent could be

used in this context. My work revolves around conceptual ideas of fiction, subjectivity, horror and beauty.

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : L'appellation « film étudiant » est souvent péjorative. Les gens pensent que le film est de moindre qualité parce que c'est un étudiant qui l'a fait, alors que je crois fermement que ces films sont au même niveau que les autres films qui sont produits.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : Les vrais juges de nos films sont situés hors de l'université : il s'agit du marché, des festivals, des galeries d'art. Ici, au Québec, la communauté cinématographique est une très petite communauté. J'aime prendre mes films et les sortir dans un autre environnement, dans un autre pays et voir comment ils sont reçus, ce que les gens pensent de ces films. C'est ça qui est intéressant. C'est important de savoir ce que les gens pensent de mon cinéma, car je parle beaucoup de la façon dont mon cinéma peut traverser les frontières culturelles et être connu et aimé dans d'autres milieux.



July's Wet Dream de Kara Blake

S.D. : I see you don't necessarily consider yourselves as student filmmakers because of the pejorative connotation that can be associated to it, but I'd like you to talk about how you see the fact that being a student helps you obtain the equipment, get logistical support, how playing in student film festival creates a network that is supportive and how, as a student, you have access to financing. How do you connect being affiliated with a university and showing your work to the outside world?

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : Personnellement, côté financement, j'ai dû fournir le financement de mon film de thèse à 100 %. J'avais un peu d'argent de l'université mais c'est quand même moi qui ai financé tout le projet. Pour le financement du film que je

suis en train de faire, je reçois du financement de l'extérieur mais je dois t'avouer que je n'ai jamais mentionné le fait que je suis étudiante à la maîtrise. Si tu es étudiante, les gens ne te prennent pas au sérieux.

S.D. : Les bailleurs de fond pensent que les étudiants ne sont pas sérieux ou plutôt que c'est le rôle des institutions académiques de les financer?

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : Je crois qu'ils pensent qu'on a l'argent pour payer nos films plus facilement et qu'on a accès à l'équipement, des trucs comme ça. Même si tu as accès à l'équipement, ce n'est pas pour une période assez longue pour faire un travail en profondeur. Personnellement, je tourne un peu, je prends quelques semaines de recul, je retourne tourner, alors que dans une institution où tu as accès à la caméra une fois dans le semestre, c'est impossible de travailler à ton rythme. On se plaint pendant notre séjour à l'université, mais quand on sort, on se rend compte que c'est encore plus complexe. Côté distribution, je n'enverrai pas le film que je viens de tourner dans les catégories étudiantes car je ne pense pas que parce que le film est fait par un étudiant, il ne devrait pas être considéré selon les mêmes critères que les autres.

KARA BLAKE : As a student, you're not eligible to apply for Canada Arts Council or Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec grants. I find that even though there is a little bit of financing available through the school – and it's very minimal – this is an unavoidably expensive vocation that we have chosen. It really takes some effort to balance the making of your film with your life. Everybody in our class was working, either full or part time, which is hard to balance with the filmmaking workload. But, there are perks to being a student in terms of having a network of peers that help each other out – the connections made between students are pretty invaluable.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : Je crois que c'est un peu ridicule de penser qu'être étudiant va nous aider. Le plus important, c'est le film. C'est toujours le projet qui est important. Si mon *curriculum vitae* dit que je suis étudiant ou que j'ai fait une maîtrise, je ne crois pas que ça ait un impact substantiel. C'est nous, notre oeuvre, l'écriture de notre prochain scénario, qui sommes importants. Être étudiant peut aider certains individus, mais mon espace est toujours dans l'oeuvre, en ce moment.

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : Je voudrais rajouter quelque chose au sujet des sources de financement. Le programme de bourses *Imperial Tobacco du Canada* donnait une bourse aux finissants en arts et le programme a été annulé. C'était la seule source de financement. Alors il n'y a plus rien pour aider les étudiants qui finissent maintenant.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : Je crois que c'est ridicule, qu'en tant que cinéastes qui avons déjà fait des films et qui sommes respectés dans la communauté, nous ne puissions pas appliquer pour recevoir des bourses. Pourquoi notre statut d'étudiant devrait-il nous empêcher de recevoir des fonds?

CLIFF CAINES : As a student in the film world, you are handicapped in some ways and you're somewhat privileged in other ways. It's a very difficult system to navigate because you're on a fence the whole time. You have to learn which identity to be at a certain time.

You have to learn how to use this status as a filmmaker strategically, mostly because being a professional or a student is irrelevant when all you want to do is be an artist. These are social systems we have to subscribe to, and I'd like to think that the institution introduces you to those systems. Unfortunately, the most relevant issue as a student, especially as a Master's student where you are half professional and half student, is that you're always in limbo and I find that extremely frustrating; you're eligible for some things and not to others. As a student, the hot topic is typically centered around receiving funding. You'd like to think that it's the work that gets you through, but it is the politics that have to be worked out most of the time. As an artist, it is not fun to deal with – it's not what I would like to ideally spend my time doing, but you certainly learn it and you certainly have to deal with it.

S.D. : We've talked about your relationship to some institutions. What do you think could make things better? What for you would be an ideal way of operating in a learning institution and being in the field practicing your art? What do you think could be changed to make your life better?

KORBETT MATTHEWS : Very hard to answer. A lot of things could be changed, but I think it's up to each individual to make the best out of their particular situation. You have to learn how to make the system work for you, and that's all this is about. That's what the big challenge is, because you have to deal with politics, with money management issues, and even though we are doing an MFA (this is kind of like a think tank we're in) we get to talk about and develop various ideas. However, there is a certain amount of practical information that we lack, and I felt that lack coming from my undergraduate degree in Film production. We are in the university, in a very isolated community, but once we are out, we discover a whole different reality. I believe there has to be some approaches that bring the industry together with the students in our position, because once you get out on the street and you're forced to make a living, how do you do it? It's not a very friendly world out there; it's not easy for young filmmakers to get funding, to get stem pay over a period of a few months. We all have to make a living and buy homes, etc, so at some point we all wonder how it will all work out. And because film is so young and the infrastructures in the industry are always going through changes, we always have to adapt. I think we all will, but it's a very tight learning curve.

KARA BLAKE : Maybe this is specific to this institution, but I like the idea of being able to adjust the route of your studies according to your own interests and in terms of your own schedule. I know everyone is different but for me, two years would have been enough and it would have been nice to be able to take more courses that weren't necessarily available to us within the Master of Fine Arts. It was difficult to take a photography course for example. For me, part of going back to school was to broaden my range of knowledge. I felt a bit limited.

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : Je suis d'accord. Je crois que la vision du cinéma qui nous est enseignée est une vision très romantique du réalisateur et de son film. Je me rends compte, maintenant que je suis en train de faire un projet avec du « vrai » financement, que ce qui nous est enseigné n'est pas ce qui se passe sur le marché. Quand on sort faire nos films, il y a énormément de trucs qu'il faut savoir et qui n'ont pas

été abordés à l'université. Au niveau de la préparation pour le marché professionnel par exemple, ce qu'on vit à la maîtrise n'est pas représentatif de la réalité. Ce n'est pas ça, ce n'est comme ça que ça fonctionne dans la « vraie vie ». Je trouve qu'entre l'école et le marché du travail, il y a vraiment un gros travail à faire en terme de « réalisme »; pour apprendre les choses qui sont très importantes, pour ne pas se faire prendre dans plein de pièges (financiers par exemple). Nous ne sommes vraiment pas préparés à la réalité du marché du film.



Locus de Cliff Caines

CLIFF CAINES : I feel that there is a large, disturbing trend of segregation happening within this institution (if we're talking about this institution specifically, since it's the one we're experiencing). There are certainly some closed systems. Working within this system, as I discussed before, is hard enough. To project it onto other systems is very hard because it's so segregated. You can't make bridges, even within, say, Concordia as an institute or the geographical and academic levels, as Kara said. If we wanted to bridge cinema and photography, there would be very little to no resistance in the art world. However, when you're dealing with academic institutions there are barriers established due to regulations based either on provincial, regional or federal systems. These barriers, like it or not, comprise the creative environment we're working in. These are microcosmic versus macrocosmic issues and it's hard to affect one or the other. But it would be nice, or in my opinion, it would have been better to simply have that free flow of movement as a student. Even though there are limits, these are things you can overcome if you try hard enough, if you push the right buttons. We do learn how to navigate, even though the ways we do this are not necessarily the things they teach you how to do. That's the question: should they? Maybe not. I'm being pretty negative at this point, but my points can also be very positive, in the sense that working within the university allows you to concentrate and it gives you a bubble of safety to continue to work over a condensed time. If you're working in a MFA situation, you're working on a thesis which is supposed to be concentrated, whether its a piece of work or a body of work. Again these definitions are very subjective. Something very important for me is context – it should be the overall decision you make.

S.D. : You've talked mostly about what could be changed in your situation as a student. Do you see anything that could be done by public institutions or by other institutions to welcome new filmmakers, to make it easier to start their practice outside of the academic world?

KARA BLAKE : It would be beneficial for everyone if there would be more of a liaison between industry professionals and academic institutions where we had more people from the industry come in as guest speakers and share their knowledge and give us some ideas of what to expect once we're outside of the school system.

CLIFF CAINES : I could continue on that – I would push that idea of a connection with real filmmakers that are practicing now; filmmakers that have not gone through this institution or perhaps have. In my three year experience here, I have not met one «working» filmmaker outside of this institution let alone an institution in Québec, in Canada for that matter or even the world. There have been a few instances, but they were very directed meetings, oriented for a very specific cause, rather than an open situation. Maybe opening up those doors would be interesting just to have the real experience of how they work. That would be a wonderful view for a student who is aspiring towards that position in the filmmaking world.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : Like it or not, filmmakers are entrepreneurs. We have to – I hate this word – *sell* our ideas. We can't pretend that filmmaking doesn't exist within an economy. It does. You have to realize that we need all those other skills besides these creative skills that we each individually have or these talents that everyone has. We need other basic foundations to prepare us for proper filmmaking careers. These are things that I don't think any institution can teach. I know industry is a dirty word in a school of Fine Arts, but it's the system that we have.

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : Je pense que c'est la responsabilité des institutions de financement de venir informer les gens sur ce qu'ils offrent comme options. Je pense que c'est beaucoup plus facile pour nous d'avoir du financement du Conseil des Arts (que ce soit du Canada ou du Québec) parce que c'est quelque chose qu'on peut gérer nous-mêmes. Par contre, quand on commence à jouer avec des gens des institutions comme la SODEC ou Téléfilm Canada, c'est une toute autre histoire, c'est très différent. Ces gens-là devraient venir nous former un peu sur les vrais enjeux qu'il faut gérer lorsque l'on s'embarque avec eux, plutôt que d'avoir à payer des gens, une fois le financement reçu, pour venir nous expliquer tout ça.

S.D. : I'd like to talk about the relationship (if there is one) within the School of Cinema between the Film Studies students and the Film Production students, who you share the same building with. How do you interact with them? how do you feel perceived by them? Let's talk about the cohabitation of a more theoretical world and a more practical world.

KARA BLAKE : I think that within our institutions there really is not a dialogue between Film Studies and Film Production students, which I think is unfortunate. I think a relationship between the two would be beneficial for both. I think it's unfortunate that Film Studies students aren't writing about us (and I don't want to sound egotistical), but we

are contemporary filmmakers that are right next door to them and they have never seen our films. We are the next generation of filmmakers. It's unfortunate. I've heard someone say that film studies students think we're stupid, and we think they are untalented. I really don't agree with that.

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : There is a myth that people in film studies are failed filmmakers. I'm personally allergic to Film Studies in the sense that I didn't like to take those classes, but I only know one person from the Film Studies graduate programme. It seems that the institution is not encouraging the two to get together.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : I think it's also because of the facilities we have here. We are in an office tower, which is a very un-university environment. There isn't a place in the School of Cinema to meet, there is no space to socialize, no common area where we can have a conversation. Regarding Film Studies, I don't know anybody. I know a few professors for having met them at a few social events. They are very separate worlds. They are two separate departments, MA and MFA, and very few courses are open to students of both programmes. I made a decision: I have nothing against theory, but it's the practice of filmmaking that interests me. The idea of studying film is not my cup of tea; I'd rather be making it.

CLIFF CAINES : These systems are predetermined before we arrive here. We walk into a situation where there is that mythical/religious schism going on that is very bizarre, in my opinion. Ultimately, I think it would be the responsibility of the students to break down those walls. Whether institutional or social, I think there is so much potential. I just hope for a breaking down of those walls, and I do see it more and more, but again, once these predetermined situations exist, it's very hard to break them down. I think we can if we work very hard, but I think there has to be the passion and the desire for it to happen. The studies at this level are so concentrated and I don't blame anyone to be self-centered because you're doing concentrated studies. I still think there is potential for dialogue in the social realm. Whether or not there is energy for it, I don't know.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : My criticism would be that film theory, and this is not to take anything away from film theorists, does not help me. A lot of film theory confuses me. Confusing not in the sense that I don't understand the words or the theories, but it's so far away from filmmaking. What I would like to see more are filmmakers, faculty members in Film Production, building a course at this university about the theory of filmmaking. There is a wealth of writing about filmmaking by filmmakers. There is a different language that is used. A language that is practical, a language that demystifies cinema and allows us to understand what is the process of filmmaking. I think that's what we're missing, and as filmmakers, we need to learn more about how other filmmakers do it and what their thoughts about sound and image are. We're lacking our own kind of language, our own kind of filmmaking theory, which is relevant to the act of making films.

S.D. : The next question is touching your situation as a student in Montréal. Some of you come from other cities, some of you come from Québec and others don't. You've been

reading Montréal papers, where most of what is written about Canadian cinema is about Québec cinema. I'd like to know if studying in Québec, reading about Québec cinema, working within Québec institutions, has left some traces in your practice as a filmmaker.

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : Je suis Québécoise, je travaille beaucoup avec les images environnantes, et le traitement du Québec est souvent important dans mes films. Je pense qu'il y eut une très belle tradition de cinéma québécois, mais j'ai peur de ce qui s'en vient, spécialement avec Téléfilm Canada et ses bourses à la performance, et Cinéma libre qui vient de déclarer faillite. J'ai l'impression que le cinéma québécois, qui a été connu d'abord comme un cinéma d'auteur, donne de moins en moins de place pour les films d'auteur. Je ne sais pas si dans dix ou quinze ans il y aura toujours du financement pour le cinéma national du Québec, ou si on s'en va seulement vers les *blockbusters*. On a une bonne tradition, mais j'ai l'impression qu'on est en train de perdre nos acquis.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : I don't see myself in the continuum of Québec filmmaking. I believe that filmmakers as individuals (I'm talking about filmmakers that seek to explore new territories, new styles of cinema) are living in a world where cinema comes from other countries and the cinema that influences me most is an international cinema – it's not a Québec cinema. While there are some filmmakers here that I really respect, I don't really feel that there is that collective national cinema here in this province that affects me.



Nocturnal Admission de Kara Blake

KARA BLAKE : One of the reasons why I came here is that I had always been impressed by Québec filmmaking, but as Korbett said, I'm talking about individual filmmakers, not so much about some kind of totality represented by Québec filmmaking. It always seemed to me that Québec allowed individuals to maintain artistic and creative integrity that seemed to be lacking in other parts of Canada. I hope to be able to maintain that integrity in my own work, but I would want to do that anywhere. I don't know if I'll be able to find my place in the francophone film industry, but that too is constantly changing. Hopefully there will be room for me.

CLIFF CAINES : I think Québec cinema has a flavor that is rivaled by no other cinema in the world and that's what attracted me to it, as an anglophone working in Canada. I think there is an inherent problem with the Québec classification in the first place. It's a frustration we have in naming a cinema that is inherent to a region. Nonetheless, the tradition of Québec cinema is wonderful and that's what did attract me originally, until I discovered how it has evolved. I think the problem now is the closed system that does not allow for the definition of what a current or contemporary Québec filmmaker is. What does that mean now? I think these are some frustrations I have been dealing with living in Montréal. Again, if we're talking about regions, Montréal is very different from Québec and Québec is very different from Montréal, and those two are quite different from Canada. There are classifications which I disagree with in the first place. I think it's the institutions that build up those brackets, those walls. And for me, as an anglophone filmmaker, and a student as well, I have not been able to break through any of those walls. Consequently, I made a decision to leave these institutional systems, and just make films wherever I am.

S.D. : As a conclusion, I'd just like to know how you see your future. What are your plans for the short and long term?

CLIFF CAINES : I hope that I can continue making films. I have no monetary aspirations. I know that idea is very hard to swallow in the system we live in today, but really the most idealistic outlook is to be able to make the next film, and as an MFA student I think I have a good proportion of the tools, the experience and the knowledge to have to confidence to continue to make films, and that's really my dream. If I can do that, I'm happy. Location is irrelevant in my case. I'm a nomadic Canadian, my roots can grow anywhere, and I can leave them anywhere.

KARA BLAKE : Same for me, obviously I would like to continue making my own films and I would like to ideally stay here in Montréal. Hopefully the two of those things will go hand in hand.

MARIE-JOSÉE SAINT-PIERRE : À court terme, vu que je viens de démarrer ma compagnie cette année, j'aimerais ne pas faire faillite et pouvoir terminer mon court métrage. À plus long terme, je pense que je vais prendre une petite pause du milieu du cinéma. C'est plus complexe que je ne le pensais, et je suis désillusionnée de ma vision romantique du cinéaste. Je veux faire un doctorat en création. C'est certain que je vais revenir à Montréal faire des films, mais j'ai besoin d'une petite pause cinéma.

KORBETT MATTHEWS : My hope for the future is to find ways to work creatively outside of the industry. As someone working in documentary and who has to make his living by working for television, I have to find how to work within financial structures that would allow me to spend more time and invest myself more personally on my films. I'd like to move into some areas that allow for more cinematic exploration. We're living in one of the most interesting times of the last hundred years, with George W. Bush hanging on for four more years, so I'd just like to make more films. There is so much to be done out there.