



*Expo 67*, The National Film Board of Canada.

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## The Canadian Scene

1967 was an important year in Canadian history in general and for Montreal in particular. Since the centennial of Canadian Confederation was celebrated in the summer of that year, Expo 67, the world's fair, was held in Montreal. In the extraordinary book, *Expo 67. Not Just a Souvenir*, Rhona Richman Kenneally and Johanne Sloan point out how the event brought together architecture, design, art, and technology in a glittering modern package. With its aim of fostering global understanding and international cooperation, critics have described it as a laboratory of experimentation in architecture and design, where cultural exchange could take place.

The exhibition's central motif was *Terre des Hommes/Man and His World*, the territory inhabited by human

beings. Kenneally and Sloan maintain that the main unifying principle of the exhibition was an essentialization of the Human Being (capitalized), by examining his/her behavior in this environment, underlining his/her achievements in the fields of ideas, culture, and science. This point of view proposed to visitors that this unique, aspirational figure represented all the inhabitants of the planet. A contemporary reading, like the one presented in the book's collection of essays, points out that the geopolitical, ethnic, or religious differences and the conflicts they involve are not even included in this idyllic vision that invited visitors—men and women alike—to believe that the planet belonged to that collective called humanity.

Despite this, precisely because it was made up of pavilions from other countries, Sloan and Richmond state that, as proof that the geopolitical map was in the midst of a transformation, the Expo was also a chance to promote

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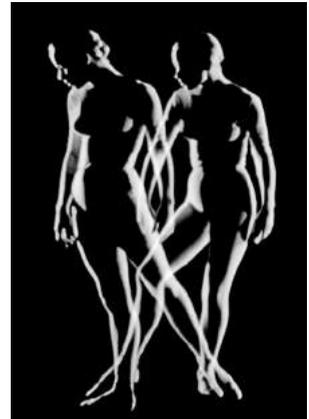
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an emerging post-colonial consciousness: for example, Algeria made its debut on the world stage as a new independent entity, and the Africa pavilion testified to the national liberation struggles of the time. In the middle of the Cold War, Cuba was announced in an Expo pamphlet as the first socialist country in the Western Hemisphere; and Canada provided the almost historical stage for the U.S. and Soviet pavilions and their opposing world views to shine.

The Expo's conception, then, could be considered paradoxical, since, in order to ensure harmony, it sought to offer a homogenized vision of human well-being, and, based on that, disguised the obvious reality of the real context both on a national and a region level. Thus, the doubts put forward are linked to the question of whether it was even possible to speak of a homogeneous Canada and a harmonious humanity.

The 1960s was the decade of Quebec's Quiet Revolution: it not only represented the split of the Catholic Church and everything that it implied ideologically in the daily lives of Quebec men and women, but it was also an affirmation of its identity, a linguistic and cultural identity

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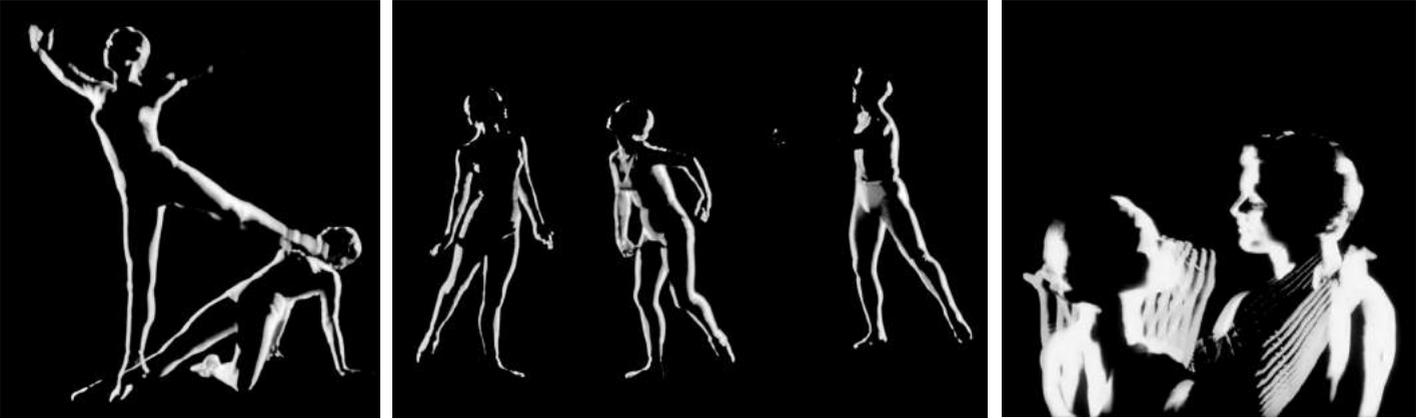


*Pas de Deux* (sequence), The National Film Board of Canada.

that was different from that of the rest of Canada. In the United States, 1967 was the year of the Summer of Love, and also when youth rebelled and created countercultural movements linked to feminism, civil-rights activism, and protests against the war. This U.S. context became important for talking about Canada because young men who claimed conscientious objector status and were denied, plus those who had not been able to avoid the draft, simply crossed the border to the north to avoid fighting in Vietnam. The chapter in John D. Belshaw's book on Canadian history dealing with counterculture, published by the University of British Columbia, points out that the U.S. media familiarized Canadian homes with dissent.<sup>1</sup> Through television, they witnessed it on the news covering



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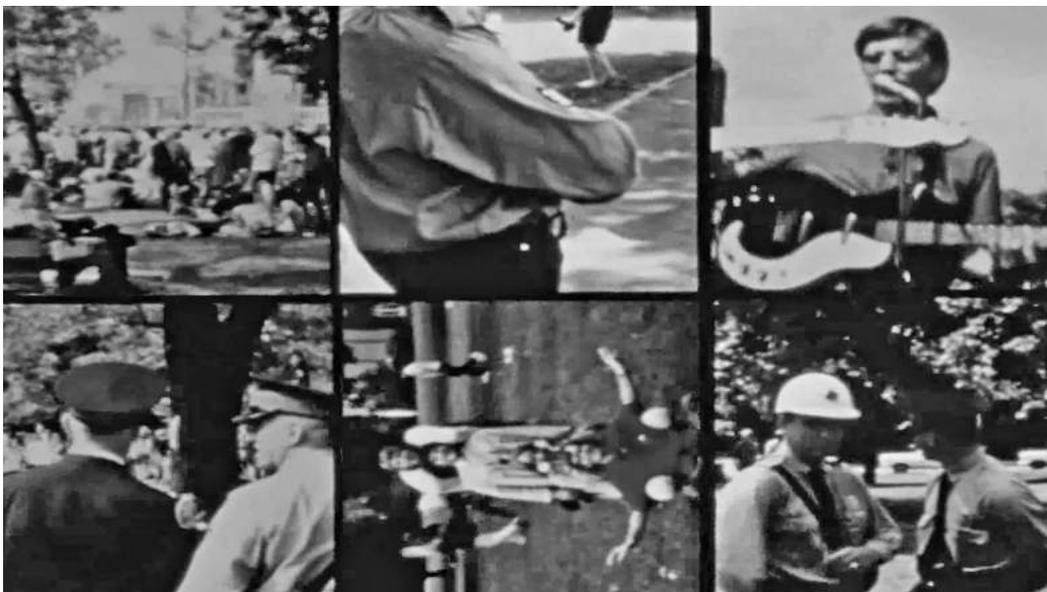


the violence involved in the civil rights movement; both what was happening to African-Americans and what was happening in Vietnam was being read in Canada as atrocities and U.S. government incompetence. With the expansion of Canadian universities, U.S. professors and students moved north; and their ideas spread there and merged with Canadian concerns about freedom of expression and thought, the New Left, feminism, the Indian-American movement, and the critique of establishment values. Working class male and female students both led the protests and many of them were arrested.

Out of all of this grew another paradox: anti-Americanism and, simultaneously, a movement that argued for a more independent Canada. “So, while in the United

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States, hippies were challenging [U.S.] American patriotism, in Canada, Canadian hippies contributed —ironically— to a growing sense of Canadian nationalism.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars think that many of the U.S. hippies, white male and female university students, blended into the English-speaking urban Canadian population, while others went to the Pacific Coast to set up communes. Mark Vonnegut wrote his autobiographical *The Eden Express* about his own experience in this vein.



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In this context, 1968 was a noteworthy year for Quebec and Anglo-Canadian literature and cinema. What follows is an inventory designed as an invitation to describe poets, film makers, and music, men and women creators who in that year were starting out and became part of the Canadian canon.

The very first milestone is Michèle Lalonde's poem "Speak white" and here we remember a fragment of it:

...  
*Speak white*  
It is a universal language  
We were born to understand it  
With its teargas words  
With its nightstick words  
*Speak white*  
*Tell us again about Freedom and Democracy*  
We know that liberty is a black word  
Just as poverty is black  
And just as blood mixes with dust in the streets of  
Algiers  
And Little Rock  
*Speak white*  
From Westminster to Washington take it in turn  
*Speak white* like they do on Wall Street  
White like they do in Watts  
*Be civilized*  
And understand us when we speak of circumstances  
When you ask us politely  
*How do you do*  
And we hear you say  
*We're doing all right*  
*We're doing fine*  
*We*  
*Are not alone*  
*We know*  
That we are not alone.<sup>3</sup>

"Speak white" is a racist insult hurled by English-speaking Canadians at non-English speakers. Lalonde's poem is simultaneously a grievance laid at the door of a "you" who considers himself superior and is master, employer, offensive, and condescending, and an affirmation of the language spoken by the Quebecois. The poet is the spokesperson of a community and the poem, a call for the colonized to awaken.

That year was also that of the first production of *Les belles soeurs* (The Sisters-in-law), by Quebec playwright Michel Tremblay. It was a milestone, too, because it was the first in which the characters speak jòal, the slang word for the language spoken by part of the Montreal working class, that is, a variety of Quebec French.

But, in addition, it was the year of the publication of Pierre Vallières's provocative book *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (White Niggers of America), which he wrote while he and other colleagues were jailed for belonging to the Quebec Liberation Front. His is one of many texts that break with the order imposed by the federal government due to Anglophone economic domination and the will to suppress the identity of those previously known as Franco-Canadian, but who in the 1960s fully took on board their identity as Quebecois.

But in the English-speaking world, the most important women writers of today's canon, who revolutionized that canon, previously exclusively male, also had an important presence in 1968.

Margaret Atwood published "The animals in that country." Here is a fragment of it:

...  
In this country the animals  
have the faces of  
animals.  
Their eyes  
flash once in car headlights  
and are gone.  
  
Their deaths are not elegant.  
  
They have the faces of  
no-one.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, Atwood also disagrees with colonization, the abuse of power, and domination. The animals in this poem are a metaphor for the colonized murdered with education and good manners, by those who, since they hold the weapons, own their victims' lives and deaths.

Leonard Cohen, for his part, also broke the rules by publishing his *Selected poems* in Toronto, which include the song lyrics seen as poetry, joining together popular music with literature, where we find, among others, "Suzanne."



*Walking*, The National Film Board of Canada.

Alice Munro published her first book of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The title is illuminating since the characters in the stories are unhappy or live like shadows. Narrated with dry, sharp precision, the stories also speak to an unharmonious Canada. In the stories of childhood, situated in poor rural areas, the main characters point out the class differences with their fellows, the religious differences among the adults, the housewife/mothers who have seen better times, the efforts by working fathers who have had to give up their ancestral trades because they can no longer make a living at them and who do low-paying, degrading jobs to survive. Among the young adults, she narrates the transformation of the urban spaces due to the growth of the cities that reach the towns, disfiguring them with the advent of suburban housing projects for middle class professionals whose expensive comfort drives out the previous inhabitants, whose poverty blights the landscape.

Animation also innovated in 1968, from the NFB/ONF studios. Two works that became part of the canon premiered that year: *Pas de deux*, by Norman McLaren, and *Walking*, by Ryan Larkin. The former experiments with the figure of two Canadian ballet stars, dressed in white against a black background; and the second observes a body that, as it walks, becomes poetry.

This was the scene in Canada in 1968. The year of contrasts, of blacks and whites, of love and war, of freedom

1968, year of blacks and whites,  
of love and war, of freedom and repression,  
of words and silences, of frustration and hope  
that the world could be better.



and repression, of words and silences, of the quest for and the reaffirmation of identities, of frustration and hope that the world could be better. And actually, in Canada, it was; 1968 was a notable year for art, art that never resigned itself to injustice. ■■■

## Notes

**1** John Douglas Belshaw, "Chapter 9.16: The 1960s Counterculture," in *Canadian History: Post-Confederation*, bc Open Textbook Project (Vancouver: UBC, 2016), pp. 626-632, [http://solr.bccampus.ca:8001/bcc/file/504e63e2-0742-4d47-b763-49728f8b88e3/1/Canadian-History-Post-Confederation-1506534780.\\_print.pdf](http://solr.bccampus.ca:8001/bcc/file/504e63e2-0742-4d47-b763-49728f8b88e3/1/Canadian-History-Post-Confederation-1506534780._print.pdf).

**2** *Ibid.*, p. 630.

**3** Michèle Lalonde, 1968, Albert Herring, trans., 2001-2012, see the entire poem at <https://umaine.edu/teachingcanada/wp-content/uploads/sites/176/2015/06/1-Speak-Whiteen.pdf> and in the voice of its author at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hsifsVi2po>. The author, editor, and translator of this article understand the fundamental contradiction of translating a poem, originally written in French with certain words in English, that deals precisely with English-language domination and oppression in a bilingual country. For our readers, however, we have no choice but to provide the English translation most commonly cited, by Albert Herring, with the words that were originally in English in the poem rendered in italics. The rest of the original poem was written in Quebec French. (Translator's Note.)

**4** Margaret Atwood, "The animals in that country," *Selected Poems 1965-1975* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976). You can see the entire poem at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47791/the-animals-in-that-country>. [Editor's Note.]