

## **RIDM 2021: Act local, think global**

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In 2021, the Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) opted for a hybrid format for its 24<sup>th</sup> edition (10-21 November 2021), but the real novelty was the appointment of a new director and a new programming team. I investigate the selection of this new team through the lens of the territory where the festival takes place (Quebec, Canada). In particular, I will examine the profile of the new members of the festival's programming team. In so doing, I will argue that the festival's shift toward a collective of programmers may have influenced the work of its programmers as well as the films they selected. This change in festival leadership presents both a challenge and new opportunities: the new team must both preserve the 'RIDM spirit' and make its mark by changing the festival's programming. In this uncommon situation, I am asking: what led to the nomination of new programmers, and what is at stake for the new collective? I have had the opportunity to discuss the matter with two members of the programming collective, Marlene Edoyan and Hubert Sabino-Brunette, as well as with the current director of RIDM, Marc Gauthier.

### **Situating RIDM**

RIDM was created in 1998 by a group of documentary filmmakers. As Malcolm Guy, one of the founders of the festival, explained to me, the festival has a French name because: 'The idea was to create a friendly place outside of the more competitive international forums where French-speaking documentary filmmakers from Quebec could meet.'<sup>[1]</sup> As a province that is 85% Francophone, Quebec has a special place in a Canada that is 75% Anglophone.<sup>[2]</sup> It was of major importance to foster a French-speaking event in a mostly English-speaking Canadian cinema, in a context where '[d]ocumentary film festivals appearing in the late 1980s and 1990s soon attained international recognition

and eventually would become referents for their geographical areas of influence',[3] in this case Quebec.

On 15 February 2021, RIDM hired a new director, Marc Gauthier.[4] He joined RIDM at a time of crisis: the festival had been without any general management for seven months. Without a director, it was left to the head of four departments: administration, programming, communication-sponsorship, and industry (also known as the Forum RIDM). The Covid-19 pandemic and the issues that accompanied it have added to the problems of funding and precariousness that affect some festivals. Several employees left their positions and the festival seized the opportunity to restructure the organisation. For instance, the communications-sponsorship department is now divided into two autonomous entities.

## The programming team

For the past ten years, the organisation of the programming was indeed relatively stable and structured as follows: a director of programming, a pre-selection team, and a selection team. The members of the different teams also remained fairly stable over the years. The reasons why the previous team members left the festival are not entirely clear and there was no public communication announcing their departure. Some internal dissension seems to be involved, leading to the crumbling of the department.

Gauthier explains:

There had already been a lot of movement when I started at RIDM: people who had been members of the programming committee for several years decided to take a step back. Then, the director of programming, who had been working there for some time, 5 or 6 years, left. Other people started to leave. They had questions of their own. It was around half of the team who left. There was a domino effect [my translation].

The pandemic may have been a timely moment to pass the baton. None of the members of the previous team are part of the new group formed in 2021 – they all decided to pursue other projects outside of RIDM. This opened the door to a reflection about the internal configuration of the programming department. Furthermore, the pandemic followed a questioning period for the previous programming team. Indeed, the screening of *Of the North* and its reception in 2016 was a pivotal moment in the history of RIDM, highlighting certain choices and current orientations of the festival. Directed by Dominic Gagnon, *Of the North*, is a collage of YouTube videos that were presented as being representative of the daily life of Canada's Inuit populations. The screening of the

film caused a large wave of indignation from Indigenous communities at large; as such, they argued that the film was reinforcing negative representations of Indigenous communities and was depicting painful imagery. In response, the following year, a group of Indigenous filmmakers organised a roundtable, 'Indigenous Videographers shoot back', in order to discuss Indigenous representations on screen, amongst other items, leading to a public apology from the festival.[5] As Gauthier said: 'It was a very hard moment of questioning for RIDM.' [my translation].

That is one of the reasons why the word 'diversity' was a preoccupation for the festival's board when I interviewed Gauthier. He was then fully aware that the board wanted the festival to implement a diversity policy, with a particular focus on its programming. Gauthier thus proposed a reorganisation of the programming collective – shifting its operations towards a more horizontal style of work. As such, other festivals adopt a similar structure and try to change the way they program films. Indeed, IDFA, whose scope and geographical location are far removed from RIDM, similarly wishes to establish more 'transparency' and 'democracy' in its film selection process,[6] which may herald a wave of change in programming.

RIDM advertised three new programming positions. The interviews were led by the new director of the festival and one or two more members of the festival's team. Hubert Sabino-Brunette was the first person hired as a programmer; he was also present at the other interviews. Thus, the first programming member took part in the process and helped select his collaborators. The profiles of the people composing this new programming collective are quite different from previous teams. The core of the former programming team was composed essentially of other programmers or critics, most of them working for the Quebec cinephile magazine *24 Images*. There were also a couple of filmmakers in the selection or pre-selection team, although these positions tended to change with each new edition of the festival. In contrast, Sabino-Brunette is not a film critic. He received his PhD from the Department of Cinema at the University of Montreal, where he worked on the emergence of Francophone film criticism in Montreal. He currently teaches film at the Cégep (a vocational and professional school often compared to community colleges) of Rivière-du-Loup, known for its film program. He is also a member of several programming committees.[7] Similarly, filmmakers Marlene Edoyan and Nadine Gomez joined the programming collective. Importantly, RIDM has been a springboard for their respective careers. In 2012, Nadine Gomez's *Horse Palace* and Marlene Edoyan's *Figure of Armen* were both selected at RIDM.[8] Gomez returned to the festival in 2018, in national competition, with *Exarcheia: The Chanting of Birds*. Edoyan's film *The Sea between Us* was screened the following year.

The presence of two Québécois filmmakers exemplifies the role played by RIDM in the local film economy. As Edoyan puts it: 'For Quebec talents, RIDM is our platform; we want to showcase films from here.' [my translation] As Gomez was pregnant, she and Edoyan shared one of the contracts. Edoyan is also a producer, a profile she shares with the fourth member of the collective: Ana Alice de Morais, who joined the group later. Morais studied at INIS in Montreal (a film school) and had already facilitated the Talent Lab.[9] These profiles are very similar to those of the founders of the festival. This new team had the support of Olivier Maltais, who acted as a 'shepherd' for the collective, to quote Gauthier. Maltais was hired in 2021 at RIDM as programming manager but he had already worked for the festival two years before as programming assistant. He therefore had some knowledge of the festival, which facilitated the transition between the two teams. As Sabino-Brunette explained to me, some members of the collective met Bruno Dequen, the former artistic director, but there has been no official handover.

This new collective particularly focused on the festival's international dimension. Indeed, each member of the collective has a deep knowledge of a specific geographical area of reference: Quebec for Hubert Sabino-Brunette; Quebec and South America for Nadine Gomez, who has roots in Mexico; the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East for Edoyan, who is Lebanese of Armenian descent; and finally, South America for Morais, who is Afro-Brazilian. Sabino-Brunette made clear that the members of the selection committees were not assigned any specific geographic areas according to their expertise. Rather, their expertise helped them to make sure that the programming team had the point of view of someone who was familiar with the region, therefore avoiding potential programming faux pas. As such, this exemplifies what can be gained in working collectively. In Edoyan's words

ethical considerations and discussions about issues are deeper when you're working as a group. Indeed, we had many discussions about the films, especially when some of them were not unanimously approved: we had to develop a real argument. We also had to consider the identity of RIDM, and the continuity with the previous years' programming. [my translation]

## **National/international**

Since 2012,[10] the opening and closing films of the festival have been both Canadian and international. To date, there have been five films in the opening or closing ceremony from Quebec, compared to three from other Canadian provinces.[11] This year the

choice of the opening film was *Futura* (2021) by Pietro Marcello, Francesco Munzi, and Alice Rohrwacher. The three Italian filmmakers already had well-established reputations and incidentally, worked collectively on this film. *Futura* is a film about the Italian youth and their vision of their future, shot before and during the pandemic. Both the theme and the circumstances surrounding the filming led the team to choose it as the opening film of the 24th edition, Edoyan explained.

The documentary was preceded by the short film *Des voisins dans ma cour* (2021) by Eli Jean Tahchi, a Lebanese filmmaker who has been living in Montreal since 2011. The film was created during a residency titled 'Regard sur Montréal'. The idea was to contribute to 'Montreal's filmography (with) an original and compelling vision from a new filmmaker from a culturally diverse background offering a fresh perspective on one facet of our city.' [12] In other words, while an international film was selected as the opening feature, the programming collective, via this short film, decided to make a reference to the city where RIDM takes place. This echoes Cindy Wong's description of the role played by festival locale: 'Film festivals also celebrate place: the city that hosts them [...]'. [13] In addition to the territorial anchorage of the festival, there is the territorial identity of the filmmakers, as well as the territorial representations of Montreal, Quebec, and Canada. The closing film was *Gabor*, a first feature by Quebec filmmaker Joannie Lafrenière. For the collective, this feel-good movie brought the festival to a close on an optimistic note in these uncertain times. The film is also about an important figure of the Canadian photography scene, Gabor Szilasi, whose work the festival wanted to highlight. Lafrenière is not entirely new to the film scene since her previous film *King Lajoie* was presented in the short-length and medium-length film competition in 2019. By choosing a first feature as the closing film and adding a short film before the opening feature, the new programming collective has affirmed its desire to support Quebec's new generation of filmmakers.

## Emerging talents and local filmmakers

Part of the selection of international films was made through the European festivals with which RIDM has ties. As underlined by López-Gómez et al: '[...] The Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) of francophone identity-with a notable presence of European auteur documentary and links to festivals such as FIDMarseille or Visions du Réel [...]'. [14] For the international selection, it was more a question of examining the films submitted to the festival in order to present documentaries from countries or regions that are rarely seen on screen, as this allows the festival to play a role of discovery. Edoyan adds that the majority of the collective's

discussions and debates were about Quebec films because there were difficult choices to make. To support creative documentaries, RIDM added a new competitive section in 2017[15] titled *New Visions*, which aims at showcase emerging talent from Quebec with works that are innovative in form; there were only four films in the category this year, which gave them great visibility in the catalogue. At the Quebec level, it is certainly a matter of discovering new talents but also of supporting them, which is less the case at the international level. The collective had hesitations about certain films, but its role is also to offer visibility to these filmmakers:

We have to find room for local films even if we wouldn't choose them on aesthetic grounds. It's not always for aesthetic reasons. [my translation]

As Edoyan said: 'Even though we [the collective] love the more experimental films, we cannot show only those films at RIDM.' [my translation] As for the more established filmmakers, RIDM makes a point of continuing to present their work. As Edoyan told me: 'You can't ignore a film by Shannon Walsh!'[16] [my translation]

## Back to Montreal

Finally, I would like to emphasise the local anchorage of the festival and the physical context in which the films are shown. Most of the local highlights were at the Cinéma du Musée, a single-screen theatre with 291 seats, making it the largest independent theatre in the city.[17] Edoyan explained to me that the festival is not intended to be only for film lovers but also for families, friends, and funders who attend the screenings. She added that the hall of the Cinéma du Musée is large enough so that people could safely take pictures before and after the screening.[18]

The example of the premiere of *Dear Jackie* (Henri Pardo, 2021) in this theatre[19] is particularly telling. The film tells the story, through archives and interviews, of Jackie Robinson, the first black baseball player to join a professional team. Through the story of Jackie Robinson, the history, past, and present, of the Little Burgundy (la Petite-Bourgogne) neighbourhood in Montreal is told. The neighbourhood has been home to the city's black Anglophone community for several centuries. RIDM could hardly have overlooked *Dear Jackie*, a film about a community that is underrepresented on screen whereas it represented more than 180,000 persons (nearly 7% of the population of the city) in 2016.[20] Following the screening, the filmmaker took the stage to speak to the audience, made up mainly of people from that neighbourhood. Choosing a large theatre

for the premiere of a Montreal-based, community-anchored documentary was not innocent: that was literally giving space to Montreal's underrepresented peoples.

That illustrates the fact that RIDM is certainly not disconnected from the local context and takes into account the local audience. As Vallejo & Winton point out: '[...] the differentiated identity of festivals is more related to the way they contextualize films within their programs, rather than to their selection as a whole',[21] and the RIDM example shows us how this contextualisation encompasses local realities.

## Conclusion

Writing in the context of the pandemic, when most festivals pivoted online, Pat Mullen from *POV Magazine* stated that '[i]t's more important than ever to attend your local film festival'. [22] It resonates with Edoyan's words when she told me: 'It is still a festival from here.' [my translation] The collective, and the new director, have the will to reaffirm the centrality of the term 'Encounters' (Rencontres), which is the name and identity of the festival. As Sabino-Brunette told me: 'We are betting on reducing the number of films a little and then accompanying them better' [my translation] by inviting more filmmakers to discuss their films with the public. RIDM thus reasserts its priorities: to support emerging filmmakers, to contribute to the discovery of talent from here and from abroad, to remain a platform for more established local filmmakers, and finally, to play a role in education on the visual image. This new programming collective must thus face new challenges – balancing between national and international filmmaking, supporting emerging local filmmakers, while positioning itself as a prestigious showcase of international films.

## Acknowledgements

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## References

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## Sites

<https://ridm.ca/en>  
<https://www.ficfa.com/>

## Notes

- [1] Discussion with Malcolm Guy, filmmaker and one of the RIDM founders.
- [2] In the 2016 Census, French was reported as the first official language used by 85% of the Quebec population while, in Canada, 75% of the population reported English as their first official language (Immigration and language in Canada, 2011 and 2016, Statistics Canada). About languages in use in Canada: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/languages-in-use>.
- [3] Vallejo 2020, p. 86.
- [4] Before joining RIDM, Gauthier had been working as the director of the Moncton Francophone Film Festival (New Brunswick, Canada) for eighteen years. Marc Gauthier : S' imprégner avant tout, A. Duchesne, La Presse, 9 November, 2021
- [5] <https://ridm.ca/en/of-the-north-the-ridm-apologizes>.
- [6] McNab 2021.
- [7] Cinéma sous les étoiles, Ciné-vert festival, Projections Ciné dit, as well as the online platform dedicated to documentary films: Tênk. All of them are in Quebec. Edoyan and Gomez are also curators for Tênk.
- [8] Both were presented outside of the competition as world premieres and first films.
- [9] For a description of the Talent Lab, see <https://ridm.ca/en/forum-ridm/call-for-projects/talent-lab>.
- [10] I have only had access to the catalogs from 2012 to 2022.
- [11] There was no opening or closing film for the fully online edition of 2020.
- [12] See <https://www.artsmontreal.org/en/residence/cineaste.div>.
- [13] Wong 2011, p. 2.
- [14] López-Gómez & Vallejo & Barreiro & Alencar 2020, p. 250.
- [15] There are four more competitive sections at RIDM: international feature competition, national feature competition, international short and medium-length competition, national short and medium-length competition.



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- [16] Shannon Walsh is a Canadian filmmaker, well-known across Canada. Most of her feature documentaries have been shown at RIDM.
- [17] See <https://www.cinemadumusee.com/en/our-cinema>.
- [18] Due to sanitary restrictions, not all of the independent cinemas in the city of Montreal could present the films of the festival. Only the largest theaters were made available.
- [19] See <https://catbirdproductions.ca/en/productions/dear-jackie>.
- [20] See <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2019002-eng.htm> and [http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?\\_pageid=6897,67887653&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=6897,67887653&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL).
- [21] Vallejo & Winton 2020, p. 5.
- [22] Mullen 2020.