

## Boom! (1)

### The actor's point of view

by Paul Kelman

From the actor's point of view, the "boom" years from 1978 to 1981 offered the first real opportunity of professional work in film. Nearly a quarter of a billion dollars was spent making dozens of Canadian feature films. The actor who did land roles gained major film experience which was previously inaccessible to him.

He had a crack at playing more visible parts in both support and lead categories and, consequently, gained media and audience recognition. He had the opportunity of working with seasoned international professionals, thereby allowing him to gauge his talents by internationally competitive standards. There was money to be made - sometimes double, triple or even quadruple what he had been accustomed to making. This resulted in the actor acquiring a more acute business sense. He became familiar with negotiations, contracts, promotion and distribution. He began to differentiate between filmmakers with vision and those who were inspired by short-term thinking. He saw the real possibility of a formidable motion picture industry in his own country, and he wanted it.

When, in 1981, the boom went bust, the actor saw that most of the films which were made during this period had not received distribution and those that did rarely made competitive major-league money. This came as no surprise. From the start, the majority of scripts was deficient in dialogue and character development. Further, the primary function of the screenplay - to tell a good story, and to tell it originally - was neglected, there being too much emphasis on formula writing and obvious imitation of previously successful genre films. Often it was left to the actor to make the script fly. He invested so much time in trying to make it work that he was robbed of the necessary concentration needed to do his job: act. If the movie is good, the actor can be good, not the other way around.

Television producer Moses Znaimer, who acted in *Atlantic City* and *Misdeal*, explains: "You look at the incredible torrent of failed movies and you can't point to the acting as the central point of failure. The production was frequently bad, the financing was atrocious, the marketing was silly, but the acting was almost uniformly good."

Paul Kelman has acted in many films and on the stage, and had the lead role in Dal Productions' film *My Bloody Valentine*.



● R.H. Thompson, one of the most versatile and competent actors



● Nick Mancuso, back from Hollywood to buy his *Ticket to Heaven*

● Saul Rubinek, the only memorable character in *Agency*



Movie-making is a commercial industry, but the fundamental impetus to make a film must be creative. The two do not contradict one another. On the contrary, as the Americans have known for over half a century, the dynamics of feature film production is a synthesis of art and business.

One cannot make a *film* just because the money is available through the federal capital cost allowance, or by way of development and interim financing through the Canadian Film Development Corporation. In the boom years, these measures simply opened the door to the American Majors who were willing to listen and co-produce on their own terms. One makes a film because there is something to say, an idea to be communicated, a story to be told or, more specifically, "shown". Then one goes out and finds the money. The short-term thinking producers, anxious to cash in on opportunity, went to the Americans out of insecurity and became intoxicated with stars and dollar signs.

We're not talking here of a lack of nationalism or patriotism, but of Canadian talent, available and capable, being forced to take a back seat. When a producer looked to Hollywood to legitimize his Canadian production, he ended up being told what to do. 'He who pays the piper calls the tune.'

These decisions affected the actor in that the roles which became available were mostly in support of American stars. Often second-rate "TV Guide" name-actors ended up playing roles that could easily have been played by Canadian actors. But Canadian actors, it was feared, couldn't guarantee, at minimum, an American television sale.

Consequently, producers went after actors who did it for the money, not because they were irresistibly right for the role. This was also obvious in the choice of scripts the actor had to work with - scripts bought from American writers because they were American and not necessarily because the producer had a creative desire to produce that specific script. All this led to inflated costs and salaries.

*Meatballs* was one of the first movies to demonstrate that investment in Canadian films was viable. Grossing over seventy million dollars worldwide on an original production cost of about a million, it precipitated the production of many imitations. Actor Keith Knight of *Meatballs* fame and eight other Canadian features explains. "People who didn't know all that much about making films saw a buck to be made and jumped



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right in. A lot of trash resulted – a lot of trash which I took part in. I only wish more filmmakers had cared enough to make sure they knew what making a film was really about. It's no good in the end turning to an actor to make the turkey fly. You had to be able to write on your feet because the scripts were often no more than second drafts. However, all the films I acted in, even the bad ones, provided me with invaluable learning experience."

Faced with this situation, most actors did not get stuck in a posture of dissatisfaction. Instead, like Knight, they worked hard at what they were offered, learning their craft as they went along, and developing an ever-increasing critical sense of the business of filmmaking and film-acting. They also knew it was inevitable that some smaller budget films couldn't afford to play the tax shelter game, and that some weren't even set up for that purpose. These films presented the actor with a real chance of winning the lead and other major roles, even if it did mean working for far less remuneration than their American counterparts were making in other Canadian features.

Among the Canadian actors who won starring roles were: Michael Ironside in *Scanners*, Winston Reckert in *Heartaches*, Nicholas Campbell in *The Amateur*, Robert Joy in *Atlantic City*, Paul Kelman in *My Bloody Valentine*, Nick Mancuso, Saul Rubinek and R.H. Thompson in *Ticket to Heaven*, and Gabriel Arcand in *Les Plouffe*. It is significant that these films did get distribution and earned commercial and/or critical success – the magic combination that gives credibility to the word "industry".

Those producers who exercised vision in the choice of subject matter and film-packaging found most of their actors in their own talent pool. There was no question here of the so-called expatriot actor. Talent and producers alike see filmmaking as an international medium. A Canadian film actor is as much an actor if he's working in the U.S. or Khartoum. An international mix of actors has always existed for creative

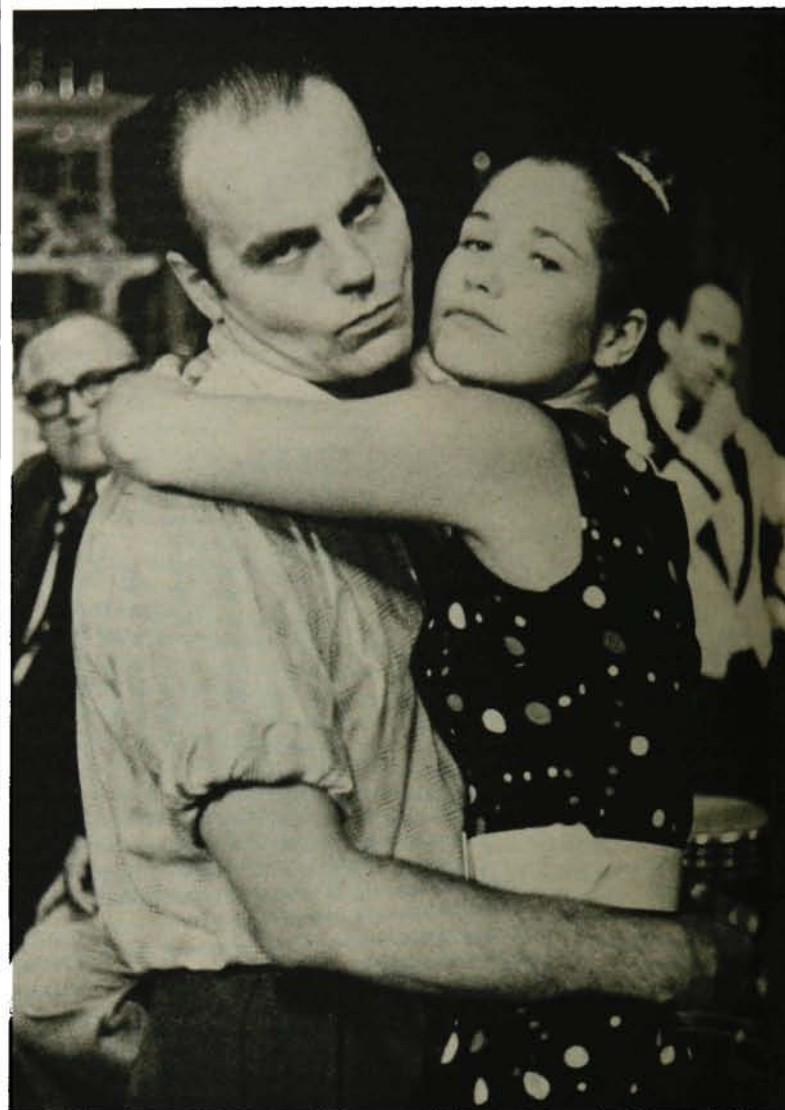
and economic reasons. For filmmakers like Gilles Carle (*Les Plouffes*), Ralph Thomas (*Ticket to Heaven*), Zale Dalen (*Hounds of Notre Dame*), Don Shebib (*Heartaches*) and newcomer Clay Borris (*Alligator Shoes*), vision payed off for them, their producers and their talent.

Saul Rubinek, this year's Genie Award winner for Best Supporting Actor, has worked in the U.S. and Canada on films like *Agency*, *High Point*, *Deathship*, *Ticket to Heaven*, *By Design* and in the American film *Soup for One* in which he had the starring role. Says Rubinek: "Suddenly the Canadian actor had the possibility of making \$100,000 a year. I'm not talking about those few actors who have their own business, but the normal work-a-day actor. He had a chance of making money, of buying a home – the way people in other businesses do."

But the actor's dream of having a big money-making movie career remained that – just a dream, an illusion. In a commercial industry like film, either you make it or you don't.

Although business expectations, career expectations and artistic expectations blossomed, fulfillment and international exposure was denied the Canadian actor. Either his films never saw the light of day, were immediately sold to TV, or came out and disappeared quickly. In Canada he gained local industry recognition, but Hollywood wasn't offering anything because the higher profile roles were being played (badly) by primarily American second-rate actors at exorbitant salaries. All this for, at least, the guarantee of a TV sale so that the producer could pass his prospectus around to potential investors.

Rubinek continues. "The films did not make money. People started to go bankrupt and invest elsewhere. This wasn't the subsidized theatre or television (CBC) the actor was used to. The actor had to face up to reality as he would in any big city where he's involved in any commercial enterprise. You have to balance good work with financial suc-



● Michael Ironside, hamming it up with Suzanne's best friend

● Gabriel Arcand, straightening out things with Suzanne



cess. Just because you were working on one film didn't mean you were going to keep working – not unless there was a continuity of film production. If artistic fulfillment meant playing leads in movies, you were a fool, a dreamer. It's called 'Leaditis': a disease that occurs in every country with a film industry. You have to learn to settle for less. You can be ambitious and go up for things. But you have to also learn to practise your craft and get fulfillment out of that.

"I know that if I just go after fame and money and do things I don't want to do in order to do things I want to do (eventually), I'll die inside creatively. And I won't know what it is I'm supposed to do. Who do you know, that after tasting power, says they've had enough? Nobody... I can't lose sight of whatever it is that makes me able to give something as a man to other people through my work.

"You have to be smart if you're an actor. If you're... hoping that the world is going to give you a living just because you're talented, you're crazy. Chaplin and Keaton were geniuses. Keaton died broke. Why? He wasn't a good businessman... He didn't protect his work.

"The good thing that came out of all this was that people got a taste of what could be. Some people did good work even in bad films. Some learned from foreign stars (sometimes what not to do). A great deal was learned from foreign directors too. We learned something about the industry and now there are more people than ever who want to act, write, produce and direct in film.

"The bad part is that the way was blocked by bad work, badly done. It was thoughtless, short-term thinking... but it was just a phase. We're a young nation and we're ready."

These years transformed the actor into a realist. He realized that in order to have an enduring industry, it had to be built on a solid foundation. Economic reality must merge with artistic sensibility. If the medium is to mature, then it's time the business community take stock and become more responsive to talent.

Ian MacDougall, deputy director of the CFDC, senses a move in that direction: "There certainly has been a great attrition in the ranks of the producer group. The people who were in it for the short haul have gone back to investing in rapeseed futures. The cost of the films made under the tax shelter tended to inflate in value. In August, 1979, the cost of a feature film here was just under four million. Today it's around a million. A lot of it was the fat of the tax shelter, and a lot of it was strictly inflation. I think it's much better to go with a good story and a solid cast, and take your chances with less money.

"One of the differences today, as opposed to those low budget films that were done ten years ago... is we now have a talent pool of top professional quality.

"I think there are more people around who'll work for minimum and a share in the profit because they want to work. After all, you're not an actor if you're not



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working. But it seems to me that the producers haven't gone in yet and said openly and honestly that, yes, there has to be one producer and one boss, but that they are willing to open their books and show you that you are getting an honest reading. They could, say 'We want you to act for less than your normal rates, with the potential of making money down the line, and really share in the risk and the reward.'

"Instead it's usually (spoken like a pirate) 'Ahar! We get the low rates and we'll hide all the extras...' If producers were more open, they'd get more co-operation and be able to put things together. There are a lot of younger producers from the milieu who are probably interested in working that way."

Nick Mancuso, Canada's 1982 Best Actor, offers his insight: "We have advantages here. For one, a quarter of the world market speaks the same language, English. We have two film industries in two countries (U.S. and Canada). We have resources on two levels: economic and cultural. As Canadians we have exposure to the British and American systems of acting. We're in an extremely competitive arena... and the hostile environment of competition is what makes it happen."

"We have the experience now, we know the score. A few years ago people didn't have a clue... The talent is here, the money is still here. The next logical step is for people to get together at some level and make their own films: a private film industry."

"Subsidy was good just to keep the patient alive, but you don't want to be just alive. You want to be able to jump around and breathe, and think, and do the whole thing. Well, we don't have producers. Fine, then someone has got to say 'Hey, I can make a buck off of these guys (the talent)'. When you're in the States, everyone opens the door and smiles. Why? The reason is you are their bread and butter. The stakes are higher, and they're willing to take the risk."

Risk is a common variable in an actor's work. He takes emotional and psychological risks in developing a character and exhibiting it. Often he risks his life or his health in a difficult shoot. He risks his trust, integrity and faith in almost every project he takes on. It's the nature of the profession, a hazard which takes enormous will and sensitivity to sustain. It's his choice to be vulnerable, and he doesn't make it lightly.

Obviously, more risks have to be taken by those who make things happen: distributors, investors, producers, casting agents, and all the middle men from brokers to finders. The kind of risks that will make a "high volume, low cost" competitive industry. Big money makers aren't the be-all and end-all, but they are a possibility too. As actor Nick Campbell put it, "I don't care how bad the economy is, if you've got a good product, people will jump at it. The 'boom' indicated that there are a lot of people who are willing to play this game. There's a lot of opportunity here and there's a whole re-alignment going on. You've got to let the work speak for itself."

Letting the work speak for itself is perhaps the ultimate risk that needs to be taken - the reasonable and creative risk of making Canadian films which say something about who we are or where we come from. Again, Moses Znaimer adds "If the final funding has to come from outside the country be-

cause the gross budget is so large that you can't hope to recoup in your own marketplace, then you ought not to be surprised that those exterior markets come along and tell you what story to make and who should be in it. And, paradoxically, those are the two central things in a movie which I think are the most important, and in the boom years, were almost never Canadian. The two things which the audience most easily relates to: the story and the people in it."

Znaimer believes that on a one-and-a-half to two million dollar project, in which everyone involved works at more reasonable rates, an actor could conceivably make 30 to 50 thousand dollars twice a year, rather than getting one or two hundred thousand every four years. "If the industry pulled off a few dozen of these films annually for TV and theatres, you could get for the first time a fundamental change in the economics of the film industry. You could see anywhere from four to six hundred thousand dollars in domestic television before looking at the rest of the world. That changes something from rank speculation to a reasonable business proposition" says Znaimer.

In the boom years, when Canadian actors were cast in the leading roles, it was in the lower budget features and they often took short money, from nine to twenty thousand. They took it partly from inexperience and partly as a hedge against the future. Michael Ironside, with 25 films to his credit, (among them *Scanners* and the recently-released *Visiting Hours*), shares his experience. "I did *Scanners* for nine and change. I'm not embarrassed by that. It was a good part. I made my money back on the next film. Just because producers think 'short' and 'soft' costs, doesn't mean the actor has to. I made 18 films before *Scanners*, two of them in leads. Now *Scanners* and *Visiting Hours* are making money and they only have one thing in common. They have me in them. There's no backtracking, my career is going to go on. I'm thinking very much long term."

"You get typed in structured productions, 'til you break type. In lower budgets, they aren't buying on the hoof, they're buying favours. You take shorter money for freedom. Once they wanted leads, they had to groom us for more than supports. They had to give us a shot. So they bring in Ironside, Kelman, Reckert or Campbell, whoever..."

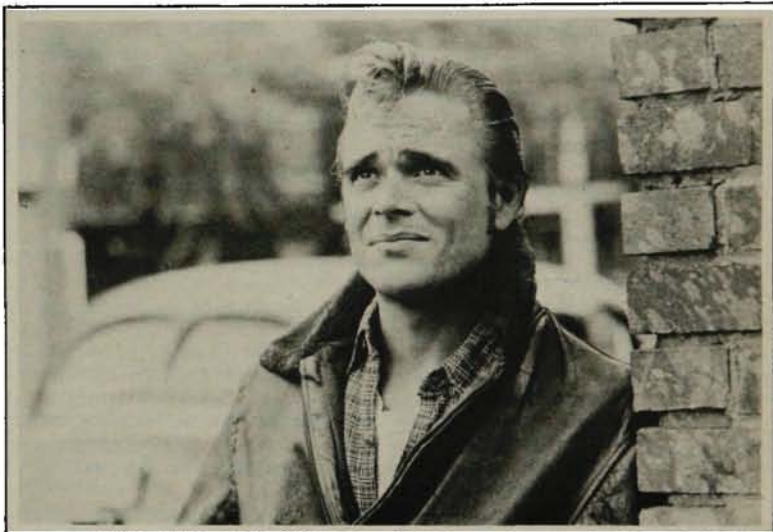
"You have to trust your actor. He can help tell your story; the director has to have enough strength for creative argument, and you grow. You break type. Really if you can't pay, don't play. That's what it's about, on all sides."

Real talent in this country demands artistic and financial parity in its contribution to the making of films. It's important at this moment in the industry's development that producers and filmmakers realize this as a necessity. The Canadian film actor is not the inexperienced and naive talent of five years ago. The transformation he underwent in the boom era has made him movie-wise. He knows what he's worth and what he has to offer. The "boom", in a sense, groomed him for today's industry. His criticism of the lack of insight and foresight during the boom years is not a chastisement but a reaffirmation of the need for responsible and creative expertise in film production.

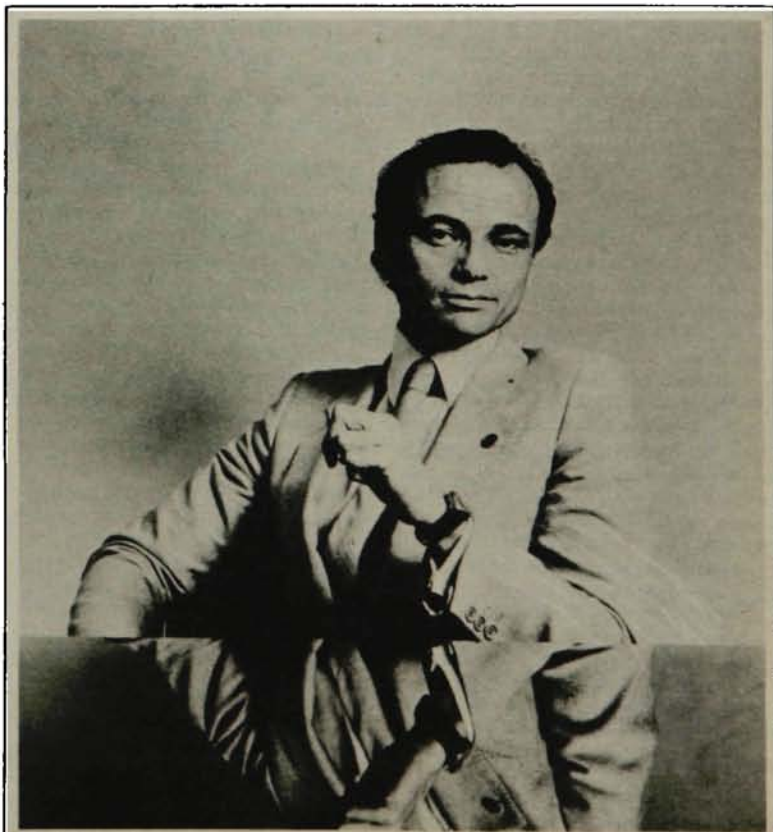
The actor today is thinking long-term. And as Ironside says, "There is no backtracking."



● Paul Kelman whose *My Bloody Valentine* tops video sales in the States



● Winston Reckert as he was in *Suzanne*



● Moses Znaimer, also a young actor after three feature roles



# Boom! (2)

## One response from a screenwriter

by Arthur Fuller

In the most recent issue of *Impulse* magazine, one of the editors takes a broadside swipe at the Canadian film industry, suggesting we throw out the baby with the bath-water and start once again. "There is no longer an indigenous cinema in English-speaking Canada. Canadian cinema is dead..." and on and on. Scriptwriter Arthur Fuller responds to the author in the article which follows.

I don't know who James Dunn is except that his name appears on the masthead of *Impulse* and that he authored an article entitled "Some Notes on an Essay About the Death of Canadian Cinema" (summer, 1982). But I do conclude after reading the piece that a) he is no logician; b) he has never invested a cent in a film; and c) romantic that he is, he would rather fill four large magazine pages with laments than solutions. To give Dunn his due, though, I am seldom provoked to respond to articles I read. Some comments:

First off, the bourgeois-nationalist schtick Dunn is doing offers up four points on a continuum: "authentic" Canadian cinema, Can-American cinema, American cinema, and a category unnamed and, for convenience of argument, unacknowledged - good American cinema (*A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Godfather*, *The Black Stallion*... add your favourites).

We started out making Canadian pictures, Dunn argues, then turned to Can-American cinema. Not only producers turned their backs on Don Owen and Shebib, Peter Pearson and Robin Spry. Face it; we all did, and for the same reason that many of us feel embarrassed that we once were hippies. As some wag put it, money is the long hair of the Eighties. Or hasn't Dunn strolled through the Ontario College of Art lately?

Next, Thomas Hobbes as author of the vision of man-as-beast: Dunn should leaf through a slightly earlier work called the Bible.

Third, we are all afraid of needles, Jim, but don't let it colour your view of dentists. One I know, having seen *Skip Tracer* on the tube one night, said that's the kind of movie he'd like to have money in, because its quality assured enough TV showings that it would eventually break even.

Ralph Thomas and I had seen *Ticket to Heaven* together (prior to its release) and discussed it at considerable length. At no time did he hint that his intent was to feed "our infantile fantasies of victimization at the hands of American cultural imperialism. It analogizes Canadians as poor lambs at the sacrificial altar of American films and television" (my emphasis). The aforementioned infantile fantasies are Dunn's alone, not mine. And it is Dunn rather than *Ticket* who does the analogizing here. But perhaps he believes, contrary to what the content of *Impulse* usually implies, that the artist's intention is irrelevant (a Barthesian?). I think Ralph made a film about Moonies and the fact that normal citizens are the most susceptible, having already bought one line of bunk.

Here and there the strain of Dunn's contemptuous posture toward non-artists (dentists especially) gets the better of him, as in "Canadians always disliked Canadian cinema for all the wrong reasons." The swirl of invective

obscures his point. Would he prefer that we dislike Canadian cinema for all the right reasons? That we like it for the wrong reasons? That we occasionally dislike it for the wrong reasons? Or, finally, that we cut our preferences loose from the leash of reasons? Your guess may be better than mine.

Dunn next tells us Canadians why we liked *Ticket* so much: it looked, felt and sounded like an American film. Curiously, American critics didn't think so and liked it anyway - but what do they know about American film? As Dunn defines it: slick, grossly Technicolor visuals, slick invisible editing, and slick, multi-track, modulated voices with unobtrusive background music.

Think about this for a moment, Mr. Dunn. Against *Taxi Driver*, *Ticket* is markedly unslick in its visuals. In fact, my eye, at least, detects a continuity with precisely the filmmakers Dunn champions (Owen and Shebib). As for soundtracks, would Dunn prefer noisy-location, single-track, unmodulated voices? Music so obtrusive that it threatens to become foreground music? And what is it with this invisible editing fetish? Would Dunn prefer sloppy, visible editing, jump-cuts and freeze-frames and other horses Godard flogged to death 20 years ago? One can only write "fuck" on a wall so many times without growing bored. Artistic issues affect all the arts, self-referentialism included, and though filmmakers came to it late they also moved beyond it sooner, while certain novelists, painters and critics linger on.

Next Dunn blithely asserts that if a film director's heart is in the right place, it matters not what *merde* he or she makes. The right place, as Dunn sees it, is a belief in the innate goodness of people. As I intimated earlier, that belief is singularly un-Christian, and there is rather a lot of Christian art in the world. Certain others have chosen to disbelieve it too, Franz Kafka among them. The point is, art has not a lot to do with belief systems. Dostoevski, they say, was anti-Semitic.

Predictably, Dunn then performs the obligatory respect-Quebec piece: "Québécois cinema has not been co-opted by corporate and American interests. Québécois cinema is not Can-American cinema." Forget Roger Vadim and Marie-France Pisier making *Hot Touch*, Pierre David making all Cronenberg's movies, RSL making *Paradise*. Forget *Atlantic City*, if you can, for the sake of argument. It's not cooption, it's internationalism.

In outlining the few Canadian films Dunn managed to like, he again takes a

swipe at dentists (some novice must have hurt him very young) before finding in *Goin' Down the Road* a clarification that "their tragedy is not born of their inability to survive, but of society's inability to provide them with access to the means for survival. 'First the eats, then the morals,' Bertolt Brecht always said. Some societies never learn." Some film critics too, I might add. It was Roger Corman who gave Martin Scorsese his first shot. I don't see Dunn coming forth with money for Owen or Shebib.

Closing his discussion of *A Married Couple*, Dunn writes: "In the final shot of the film King cuts from the one to the many, telling us the problem is one of environment, and not of human nature." What is the environment but millions of other humans, past and present? On another level, are the bacteria in Dunn's stomach part of the environment or of him? To some of us, such issues are not instantly clear, but blithe distinctions seem to be Dunn's forte.

Just before carving his inscription on our tombstone, Dunn takes yet another poke at dentists, this time poking producers and bureaucrats too. Regarding these last, let me point out that the Canadian Film Development Corporation tends to regard overtly commercial projects as unneeding of assistance. Thus they tend to get into projects with problems.

Just what Dunn means by "they want us to corporatize our reality... our dreams," I have no idea. He thinks its opposite is to personalize. The irony is that only rookie filmmakers waste time trying to anticipate the wants of an audience two years hence (which is about the fastest anybody can write, shoot and release a film, even when it's all going your way). Who goes with his own obsessions more than Coppola or Cronenberg?

Then comes Dunn's variation on the artist-in-a-garret theme: "We must go back to being a poor cinema... begging, borrowing or stealing cameras... We must abandon invisible editing... American movie stars and American genres. We must return to making the films we want to make."

Earth to Dunn: we have unions here. Is Dunn seriously suggesting - political sensitive that he apparently is - that we shoot non-union, thus guaranteeing that no union members will work on it, nor union projectionist screen it? If so, what's the point? We already have plenty of things to put on shelves.

Again he decries invisible editing. Again he drags up the spectre of America, only to kick it. (What, incidentally, is an *American genre*, save perhaps the Wes-

tern, consistently the most successful of American films worldwide?) And finally, *no* writer or director makes a film he or she doesn't want to - especially in Canada, where to make a film you must want very badly to do it. What Dunn really means here is that we should make the films *he* wants to make, but doesn't, perhaps because he has enough brains not to sink a cent into such a venture.

That's the bottom line. Film is the most expensive art in history, and the money has to come from somewhere. He doesn't like dentists, bureaucrats (though I notice *Impulse* takes money from two levels of them) or producers, or presumably their money. I wonder if he has any ideas on alternative sources of money, or on how to talk the unions into letting their members work for nothing, or on how to persuade the owner of a fifty-thousand-dollar camera to loan it to a rookie without insurance, or on how to get the film into the theatres once it's made, or on how to get the people into the theatres to see it.

I say all this not because I like all the bad movies Dunn hates, but because as a screenwriter my interest lies in proving Dunn wrong - Canadian cinema is not dead. Granted, the CFDC bent over backwards to take what certain producers were giving it from behind. Granted, Bay Street's inflation of film budgets nearly killed film. Granted too that American actors (no actual star has appeared in a Canadian film to date) neither prove their worth in audience draw nor lead to the grooming of Canadian stars. But to go back to no-budget shooting is senseless.

While I do not pretend to have all the answers, I do have an idea or two. First, put film back into the hands of directors and writers, by restructuring CFDC financing so that money goes directly to writers and directors rather than to producers who have hired the former. Projects would be submitted anonymously to a review board, whose sole options would be *yea* or *nay* - no editorialization - and could be killed after any of several stages (outline, first draft, etc.) Money would flow to writer and director to finance each subsequent stage - to a maximum, say, of \$30,000. The resultant scripts would comprise a script bank. Only then would producers be invited in to read - tax benefits being dependent on the making of a film from a script in the bank.

In this way, \$2 million could finance the writing of 70 scripts to completion, and since not all will go that far, the actual number might be over 100. Any script chosen for production would then be bought by the producer for 4 per cent of the film's budget, that amount being split between screenwriter and script bank. Out of 100 scripts there are bound to be a couple of great ones and a dozen, perhaps twenty, good ones. A good year.

Thus money flows to the two areas of our greatest need, writers and directors. There are problems in this arrangement, the most obvious being the review board, whose qualifications and hiring are subject to debate. But the important thing is to remove the grey area of bureaucratic discretion - the pre-product censorship that hampers directors with a personal vision and writers of power. Given that, we might make some great and successful films. And should some dentists in Markham invest and grow rich, at least some banker will hear about it. It can only help film to be regarded as good business.

Arthur Fuller, a free-lance writer in Toronto, wrote the screenplay to *Hit and Run* with Robin Spry.





● Sawing up a storm in *Crac*, grand prize winner

In contrast to Ottawa '80, whose central theme was the impact of the computer on the form and content of animation, this year's animation festival was more eclectic. It was a collage of animation ideas and idioms. The classic animation style of the Disney Studios was juxtaposed with the irreverent style of the Jay Ward Studio which gave us *Rocky the Squirrel* and *Bullwinkle the Moose*.

The Emile Cohl Retrospective proved the old adage that there is very little that is new under the sun. Most of the animation techniques that we take for granted today were developed by this inventive French animator.

"Special effects" is a term most of the young movie-goers could easily define because so many of their most popular movies depend heavily on special effects for their impact. Films like *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *E.T.* owe their style and success to them. Therefore another expression of the art of animation was added to the collage with a special tribute to Animation and Special Effects: Part 1 - The Beginning to 2001, directed by writer and a member of the Ottawa '82 jury, Charles Solomon.

Add to this now ornate collage, themes like Computer Animation - Today and Tomorrow, The Sound of Animation, Video Piracy, Audiences for Short Animated Film and How to Reach Them, and the films in competition and you have an intricate, ornate, and somewhat overwhelming collection of images. One image, however, dominates the collage and incessantly gives it unity. That image is a rocking chair that becomes a symbol of the highest achieve-

**Robert Hookey, a regular participant in the Ottawa Animation Festival, teaches film at Sheridan College.**

## A creative collage

by Robert Hookey

ment in animation - the ability to communicate with an audience. The rocking chair is the central image in Frédéric Back's film *Crac*, the winner of the Grand Prix award at Ottawa '82.

*Crac* is a prime example of how a well conceived idea, coupled with artistic sensitivity, can result in an animated film that touches an audience deeply. Picture a theatre packed to capacity with animators, journalists, and some members of the general public, all of whom are completely absorbed in a film called *Crac*, that creates the "the illusion of life" so superbly that they have difficulty holding back the tears. They are not responding to some manipulative melodrama but to the beauty of the film's images and its human message of love and caring found in a stable family life. It is ironic that a film that deals with family values should be so popular in a world where family life is in decline. *Crac* also reflects the French Canadian's respect for the institution of the family. Frédéric Back, an animator with Société Radio-Canada, claims he

got the idea for *Crac* from his daughter. With his concern for the careful development of a story, he spent five years on the storyboard. He was intrigued by the role a family plays in giving a child a sense of security and self-esteem. The rocking chair seemed to be the perfect symbol of family security. He remembers how his own children would join him and his wife on the rocking chair. The children would snuggle up and feel safe and secure. His wife's memories of living in a small Quebec village contributed to the authenticity of village life images in the film.

Back was influenced by two talented animators who have created some of the most innovative work in their field. Caroline Leaf's fluid style and Paul Driessen's dramatic line drawings are both evident in his animation style.

The most important consideration in the creation of an animated film, according to Back, is the careful attention given to the story-development stage. Technical ability will not save a poorly developed story idea.

The primacy of story development, especially with regard to character design, pervaded the talk given by Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, two of the famous "nine old men" who helped shape the Disney style of animation. Disney animation is sometimes referred to as "full" or "classical animation". Contrast this detailed animation with some of the Saturday morning TV animation for children and you will realize how much care and consideration was given to both technique and story-telling at the Disney studios. Johnston and Thomas have co-authored a book entitled "Walt Disney: The Illusion of Life." It is a study of what both men learned about character animation under the tutelage of Walt Disney. This is not just another coffee table book. It explains the importance of developing a story and characters with whom the audience can be involved.

Many books and articles have been written about Walt Disney emphasizing how difficult it was to work with him. When I ask Thomas and Johnston about their working relationship with Disney, they admitted that he could be a hard task master but only because he wanted the best effort from his animators. He was open to suggestions from his staff if the proposal in any way enhanced the story.

Walt Disney had two basic dictums about effective story-telling in animation: the characters must be realistic, and the audience must be able to identify with them.

There were two animation characters that made their appearance at Ottawa '82 that most of the audience could identify. I refer to that absurd duo, *Rocky the Squirrel* and *Bullwinkle the Moose*. As part of the Jay Ward Studio Salute, the



## PRIZE WINNING FILMS

### Grand Prix

**Crac**  
Frédéric Back, Canada

### Jury Commendations

**Visual Beauty**  
Current Caprice / Caprices actuels  
Steve Eagle, USA

**Animation**  
The Creation / La Création  
Joan Gratz, USA

**Experimental Technique**  
Tango  
Zbigniew Rybczynski, Poland

### Special Jury Prizes

**Effectiveness in Communication**  
S.V.P. Pollution  
Graeme Ross, Canada

**Graphic Design**  
Une Âme à voile  
Pierre Veilleux, Canada

**Absurdity of Concept**  
Clockwork Lemons / Citrons mécaniques  
Steve Evangelatos, Canada

### Films for Children

**First Prize**  
Fishing the Moon From the Pool  
La Pêche à la lune  
Zhou Keqin, China

**Second Prize**  
Das Feuer des Faust /  
Fire of Faust  
Katja Georgi, East Germany

### First Film by a Student or Independent Filmmaker

**First Prize**  
Het Landhuis / The Country House / La Maison d'été  
Josette Janssens, Belgium

**Second Prize**  
Az Ejskaka Csodai / Wonders of the Night / Les Merveilles de la nuit  
Maria Horvath, Hungary

### Promotional Films or Tapes under 5 minutes

**First Prize**  
Pig Bird  
Richard Condie, Canada

**Second Prize**  
Klondike Gold / L'Or du Klondike  
George Geersten, Canada

### Films or Tapes shorter than 5 minutes

**First Prize**  
Oh What a Knight / La Belle et la boîte  
Paul Driessen, The Netherlands

**Second Prize**  
Organic Canonic Icon  
Stuart Wynn Jones, Great Britain

### Films or Tapes longer than 5 minutes

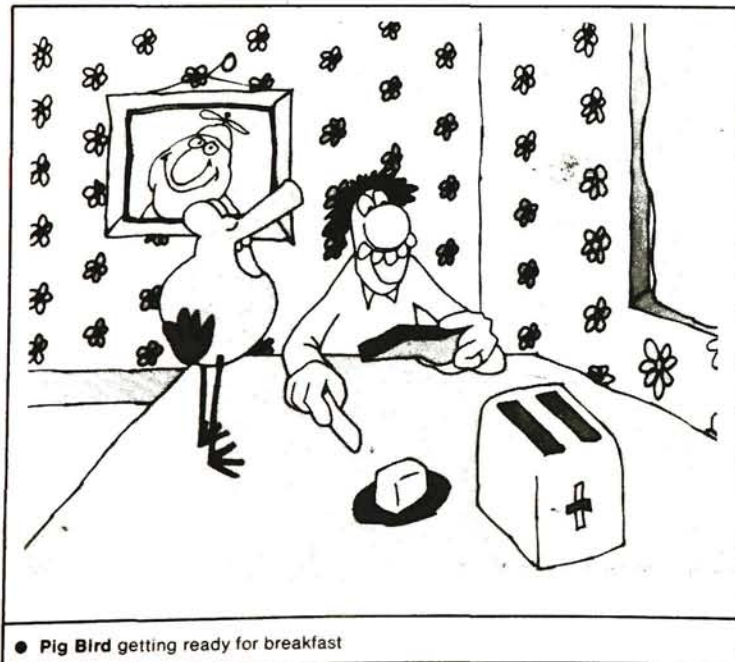
**First Prize**  
None

**Second Prize**  
Two films have tied for second place:  
Tyll the Giant / Tyll le géant  
Rein Raamat, USSR

**Complex/Mindrak/Question de complexes**  
Milos Macourek, Jaroslav Doubrava, Adolf Born, Czechoslovakia

### Prix du public

**Tango**  
Zbigniew Rybczynski, Poland



● Pig Bird getting ready for breakfast

audience was treated to some classic episodes of *Rocky and His Friends*. Still in television re-runs, the fascination with Rocky, Bullwinkle, Natasha Fatale, and Boris Badinov, has led to what could be described as a cult following. Plans to pull the series off television has resulted in angry responses in many cities across North America.

An added attraction was a reading from an original script of *Rocky and His Friends*. The readers June Foray, the voice of Rocky and Natasha, and Bill Scott, the voice of Bullwinkle, brought back some fond memories of a series that had as its main purpose to entertain by poking fun at the Great American Myths. Charles Solomon, host of the salute, best describes the studio's contribution to animation. "The Jay Ward Studio never produced great animation but it made excellent cartoons. The scripts were always satirical, topical, sophisticated and extremely funny. The cast of these shorts was a misshapen crew of weirdos, as bizarre as any character the Fleischers ever drew, with superb voices. It was not unusual for a character to argue with the narrator or point out how sloppily something in the scene was drawn. Unlike the current animated-for-television shows that attempt to disguise their sleaziness with fancy backgrounds and elaborate soundtracks, the Ward cartoon revelled in their cheapness".

An area of animation that cannot afford to be cheap is special effects. The tribute to special effects, also directed by Solomon, underscored the seminal contribution animation has made to create the "illusion of life" in the movies.

Many artists and technicians have invented some impressive effects. However, the stars in this sometimes unheralded aspect of movie making would be George Melies, Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen and the many new special effects men who contributed to films like *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *E.T.*

George Melies was a magician turned filmmaker who saw the illusionist possibilities in film. In *A Trip to the Moon*, made in 1902, he created the illusion of successfully sending men to the moon.

In 1933, Willis O'Brien used stop-motion technique to create a classic cinematic creature called *King Kong*. Ray Harryhausen's greatest invention was the battling skeleton sequence in *Jason of the Argonauts*.

There will be many new effects created in the future because one of the attractions of the movies is its ability to create worlds of imagination for audiences hungry for an escape from their problems.

I came to Ottawa '82 hungry for animated films that reflected the variety of techniques and themes that were innovative and reflected a particular country's style. My hunger was satiated to some degree by the quality of children's films in competition.

The festival seemed to be truly international in scope. The jury selection this year honoured outstanding animated films from the following countries: China, Canada, Poland, U.S.A., East Germany, Belgium, Hungary, The Netherlands, Great Britain, U.S.S.R., and Czechoslovakia.

In the category of Films for Children, First Prize went to *Fishing the Moon from the Pool* made by Zhou Keqin of China. It is a delicate cut-out animation film that relates the story of a group of monkeys who try to capture the moon.

First Prize for a First Film by a Student

or Independent Filmmaker was awarded to *The Country House* made by Josette Janssens of Belgium. This is a lyric film that shows a variety of people being enraptured by the music of Mozart.

*Pig Bird* by Richard Condie of the National Film Board won First Prize in the Promotional Category. This is another entertaining film having a practical purpose, the kind that the NFB does superbly. Canadian Customs, in order to protect Canadians' health, has rules about what animals and plants can be allowed into the country from abroad. A determined citizen sneaks the illegal Pig Bird into Canada and that is the beginning of the most humorous infestation of an unwanted bug that one will ever see. A clever film both conceptually and technically.

The winner of Films or Tapes Shorter than 5 minutes was won by the talented Dutch animator, Paul Driessen, for his film *Oh What a Knight*. A new twist is given to the story of a knight trying to save the damsel from the fiery dragon. Driessen has evolved a unique style that is married with an impeccable sense of story and timing.

The Prix du Public was given to a crowd pleaser called *Tango* made by Zbigniew Rybczynski of Poland. This is a difficult film to describe. Through the use of optical printing, a number of people play out their appointed roles in an extremely cramped kitchen without ever colliding with each other. This dance absurd is accompanied by Tango music. (You had to see it to appreciate it.)

Sometimes juries fail to give recognition to a filmmaker because the film does not fit the established award categories. Ottawa '82 jury resolved the problem by creating a category called Absurdity of Concept. Bravo! jury for your bravery. This award was given to a film entitled *Clockwork Lemon* conceived and animated by young Steve Evangelatos of Canada. A bin of lemons in a supermarket turn sour and proceed to eat their way through the shoppers and the produce. It can best be described as an urban version of *Jaws*. It is encouraging to see young filmmakers getting recognition. The quality of films in competition by young animators was better than any previous festival.

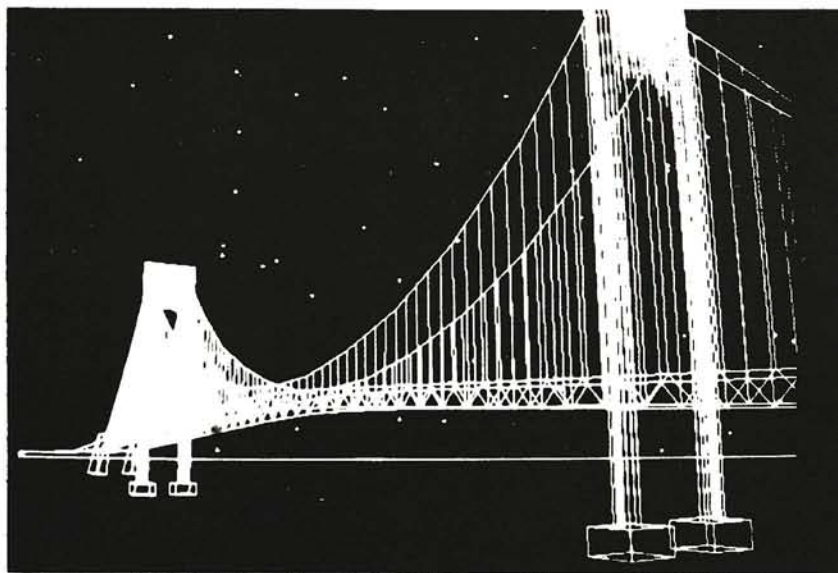
Ottawa '82 was one of the most successful animation festivals to date. This was reflected in the informative and thought-provoking workshops, the high calibre of the films in competition, and the international celebrities that added glitter to a festive occasion.

The Ottawa fest is also one of the warmest and friendliest festivals in the world. Its friendly and professional ambience can be attributed to the dedication of its Producer, Frederik Manter; Festival Director, Kelly O'Brien; International Director, Prescott Wright; and Honorary President of Ottawa '82, Raoul Servais.

Here are my hopes for Ottawa '84. I hope there will be more computer-animated films in competition. I hope there will be some new and innovative themes and techniques. I hope more time will be spent on story development to make all those hours spent on producing a 3-minute or longer film worthwhile for the animator, and satisfying for the viewer. Now I will have to be at Ottawa '84 just to see if my hopes are fulfilled.



## Of bits and bytes



*Dream Flight* by Philippe Bergeron, Nadia Magnenat-Thalmann and Daniel Thalmann

by Arthur Makosinski

"No jaggies" was the underlying motto of Siggraph 82, the Ninth Annual Conference on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques, held this year in Boston. The term "jaggies" refers to the serrated, block-like patterns produced on image edges of some computer-generated images.

Computer-assisted animation is already the norm at some of the larger animation houses like Hanna-Barbera in California. The animator is not replaced, but rather he is given a new, powerful tool. He still draws individual cells by hand, but his "canvas" is a digitizing tablet connected to a large piece of a computer memory, which is displayed for the artist on a color video monitor.

His "Brush" is an electronic stylus resembling a pencil. Its effective shape can be any shape he desires, as long as it fits into the allocated computer memory.

On the bottom of the monitor screen is a "palette" of 256 colors in which he "dips" the stylus. In this way, the animator "paints" the outline of his figures and can also automatically fill and clear

large areas, save and restore pictures, magnify the "canvas" selectively for detail work, and record histories of picture composition. He can also combine several pictures together, or call up previously recorded pictures of, for example, trees and seed them all over his current "cell." Similar treatment is used for producing background cells and titles.

The memories which store the huge amounts of digital bits associated with each scene are called "frame buffers." A single animation film frame may require as much as 500 kilo bytes (eight 'bits' equal one 'byte') of memory for a modes screen resolution of 512 x 512 lines and 8 bits assigned for each color: red, blue and green. In a half-hour show, this translates to over 500 million bytes of memory. The directly accessible memory space is the bottleneck of digital image creation. Such memory size, although possible, is still expensive and bulky.

Somewhere during the completion of a computer-animated film, a decision is made whether to "dump" the images on film or onto video tape. In case of a studio like Hanna-Barbera, whose products are for T.V., the image goes from the digitizing tablet to frame buffers, to hard magnetic disks and finally to one-inch C-type videotape. If the image is destined for the big screen, it is usually transferred directly from frame buffers, or sometimes from hard disks to a high-

resolution monitor with a 35mm camera in front of it, or in some cases directly to film using a modulated laser beam. Traditional animation techniques are also often combined with computer-painted images and the two are transferred either to video or 35mm film under computer synchronization. In general, most sophisticated programs for computer animation systems are made to measure and are not available commercially. Ampex took three years to build the system for Hanna-Barbera, which also had to buy the people who came with it.

Other studios, like the one at The New York Institute of Technology, have also developed their own software, but are willing to sell at least some of it. "Tween" is a key-frame animation system program where the artist draws or enters key-frames and the computer interpolates the missing ones. Written by Ed Catmul, its operation is similar to the programs which created Peter Foldes' *Meta Data* and *Hunger*, the National Film Board of Canada's early contribution to this field. What distinguishes Catmul's program, beyond its use of color, is that Foldes used direct, vector images, while Catmul's program is adopted for the more difficult, vast scan systems. That is where "the jaggies" have to be dealt with through complicated dynamic anti-aliasing algorithms.

It was most refreshing to view *Meta*

*Data* along with other oldies but goodies, shown at the Siggraph. The film still stands out head and shoulders above other similar efforts.

The new Canadian offering at the Siggraph was *Dream Flight* made by Philippe Bergeron and the Thalmanns. Shot off a Tektronix 4027 vector graphics terminal connected to a Cyberg computer, it was similar in technique to the Peter Foldes films and, although it spirited clever animation, it seemed dark and pretentious in its theme and choice of music.

The great treats of the show for many were the examples of solid, three-dimensional computer-generated imagery. Already used for creating TV logos and commercials for Life Savers and The Bell System, and the PBS 'Nova' and NBC logos, these directly generated synthetic images are the result of a marriage of graphic artists and some of the brightest minds in mathematics and computer science. This year also marks the first time that these images were used in two feature films, notably *Star Trek II* and *Tron*.

Lucas Films, a division of ILM Company, was responsible for creating the 1261-frame scene in which the space ship flies by a dead plane, throws a genesis bomb, and brings it to life. Here are some details on how this remarkable image was shot as described by Alvy Ray Smith of Lucas Films.

(1) Exact star positions were deter-

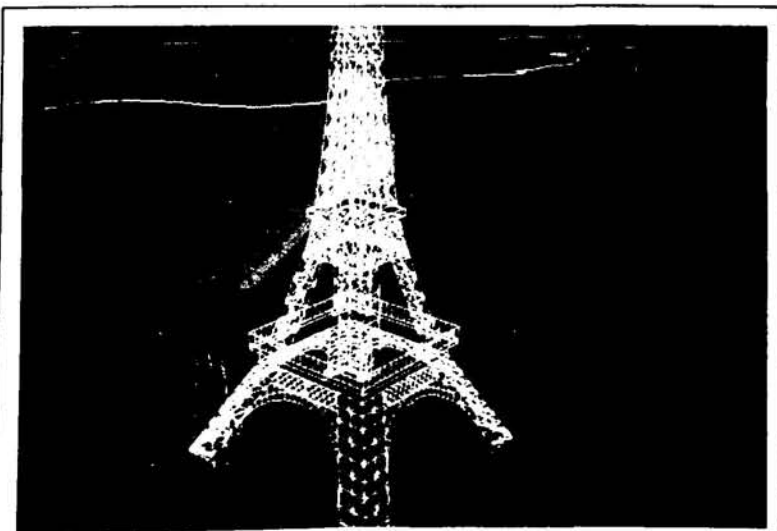
Arthur Makosinski is with the Physics Department at the University of New Brunswick and is working on a film called *Free the Meat*.



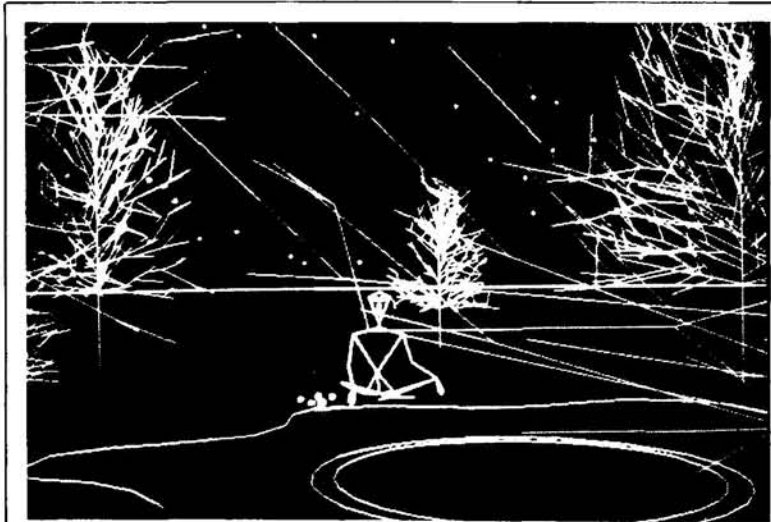
# ANIMATION



● Foldes' *Hunger* was a pioneering effort



● Reaching for new heights in *Dream Flight* and *Meta Data*



● Scenes of tranquility in *Meta Data* and *Dream Flight*



mined from the "Yale Bright Star Catalog," generated and fed into magnetic disks.

(2) The projectile path of the spaceship with respect to the earth was calculated as a 6th degree polynomial and modelled on a vector display.

(3) The image of the planet was painted by C. Evans of ILM, digitized, and "wrapped" mathematically on a sphere with shade by T. Duff.

(4) The explosion-strip image was generated by tracking 400,000 particles in several planes, all anti-aliased (no jaggies) and motion-blurred.

(5) The atmosphere was generated from actual physics formulae by Baxter's "Physics."

(6) The most difficult images of the surface of the planet, the mountains and the sea, were the results of what mathematicians know as hidden-surface algorithms consisting of 231 data points, mathematically "wrapped" on a sphere, with separate algorithms for color and shade. The calculations generated the so-called "fractal" (irregular topological dimensions) mountains whose positions and dimensions were recalculated for each frame.

(7) The scenes were then synchronized, and the output of the DEC, VAX computer was connected to a standard Barco, 500 x 486-line RGB monitor. A Vista-Vision camera loaded with 5247 films was placed in front of it. The whole filming process was automatic, and no one was present during the most of the nine hours it took to shoot the 1261 frames.

The film was delivered on time and in the exact format the producer wanted.

*Tron* made much more elaborate use of computer-generated animation. In fact, over 64% of the film was computer generated. Most of the computer work was handled by Information International Inc. and Magi-SynthaVision. All geometric models were based on sketches provided by Disney animators. Some figures, like the Sark's Carrier and the Solar Sailer, were created by digitizing orthogonal views of the Disney drawings, then test-viewing them on a vector display before the final encoding.

Other more regular shapes and shading were created using a wide variety of existing and specially written programs by ILL. Shot with a resolution of 1024 x 1024 lines with six bits depth of each primary color, the resulting resolution is as good or better than that shot with a lens of 35mm film. Relatively few people were involved on the computer end of the production, and no paper or wire models were used.

At one of the Siggraph presentations, Ed Catmull tried to set a goal for the future of computer graphics in film. He targeted realism and its manipulation as the chief aim, underlining that no words can compensate for a bad picture (don't we know that, Ed!). "Don't show a picture you have to apologize for, continue progress for higher quality," he touted. "Don't think of any hidden-surface algorithm, without thinking about the anti-aliasing (the jaggies problem)."

Computer resources for the purpose of making pictures are scarce. Researchers and experts in this field tend to associate with academic institutions or the U.S. Defence Department. Little work of this kind is going on in Canada, right? Not for long. Sheridan College in Oakville has just announced Canada's first one-year certificate program in Computer Graphics. Anyone interested?



## The programmers news and blues

Grierson Film Seminar 1982

## by Seth Feldman

Several months ago when I agreed to programme the 1982 Grierson Film Seminar, it was suggested to me that I might be looking at as many as 200 films and videotapes as part of the selection process. Surely an exaggeration, I thought, naively signing on the dotted line. There can't be that many new documentaries made in Canada during these troubled times. And there was only a limited number of slots for non-Canadians.

I went about my business, setting up a list of eminently sensible priorities. Priority one, as it must be for any programmer, is the knockout discovery, the barely completed work that everyone will be talking about after the festival, seminar or screening series. Priority two is the recent film that everybody is talking about already - the obligatory inclusion. And then, in descending order, I would be looking for good films on timely topics, so-so films by especially talented filmmakers and even an interesting failure. To spice things up a bit, I would include some off-beat works.

When asked to choose a topic for this year's seminar, I decided upon Documentary Form. That would give me a chance to program a wide variety of works and yet come back to a pet concern: the evolving conventions of informational film and video.

To a large extent what I wanted determined who I wanted. The format of the Grierson Film Seminar stipulates that the 25 documentarians presenting their works stay the entire week to interact with each other and with an equal number of critics, teachers, students, archivists and other assorted moving-image types. Thus, if we were going to talk about Documentary Form for a week, I would want the discussion grounded by someone, preferably a filmmaker, who had a solid knowledge of film theory and style. The obvious choice seemed to be Bruce Elder, whose marvelously intelligent, wide-ranging criticism has made him a central figure in Canadian film writing. I asked Elder to present *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, a work banned in Ontario and recognized elsewhere as a watershed in the development of autobiographical film.

To complement Elder, I wanted someone who was a witness to and influence upon the long-term development of Canadian documentary. Again, the choice was straightforward. Allan King

has been a prime force in documentary in this country and abroad, and has shared his experiences with students of the genre. For the Grierson seminar, King has arranged, with the help of Stan Fox, a retrospective of the work of the Vancouver documentarians of the 1950s and '60s. These all but forgotten films represent an explosion of creativity that flourished and died in almost complete isolation.

Making my job still easier were suggestions from last year's programmer, Robert Daudelin of the Cinematheque quebecoise. Daudelin pointed me in the direction of Klaus Wildenhahn, a German television documentarian whose works are just now being distributed outside Europe. Looking at Wildenhahn's work - courtesy of the endlessly generous Goethe Institute - my first impression was that of a Teutonic Pierre Perrault. *Enden Goes to the USA*, one of the films Wildenhahn will bring to Grierson, is a meticulous study of a German farmer whose real income comes from shift work at the local Volkswagen plant. Like Perrault, Wildenhahn finds his subjects' politics and lifestyles inexorably linked. And, like Perrault, he is able to extrapolate a panorama of political and historical truths from the daily lives of his subjects.

It was also through Daudelin that I

came upon Michel Moreau's *Les Traces d'un homme*. The film is something quite rare in contemporary documentary, the straightforward meditation of a highly literate essayist. Moreau witnesses the last days of the life of a cancer victim. In so doing, he attempts through a poetic text and deft editing to bear witness to death itself.

Moreau's film goes well with Jacques Godbout's two episodes in the life of Hubert Aquin. In the first of the episodes, Godbout intercuts testimony concerning Aquin's underground activities with Aquin's melodramatic performance in a grade Z spy film. In contrast, the second episode, Aquin's suicide, comes to us in a lengthy monologue. Yet this frighteningly dispassionate account of the event by Aquin's lover is also an assertion of the director's skill and taste in assembling his presentation.

Another one of Daudelin's suggestions was Georges Dufaux. A long-time National Film Board director and cinematographer, Dufaux has just released versioned prints of three films on China. Like Wildenhahn's work, the films are patient, observational studies. In the context of Canadian cinema they seemed almost pure embodiments of the traditional Quebecois documentary - *Les raquetteurs* and *A St-Henri* halfway around the world. Not only is there the

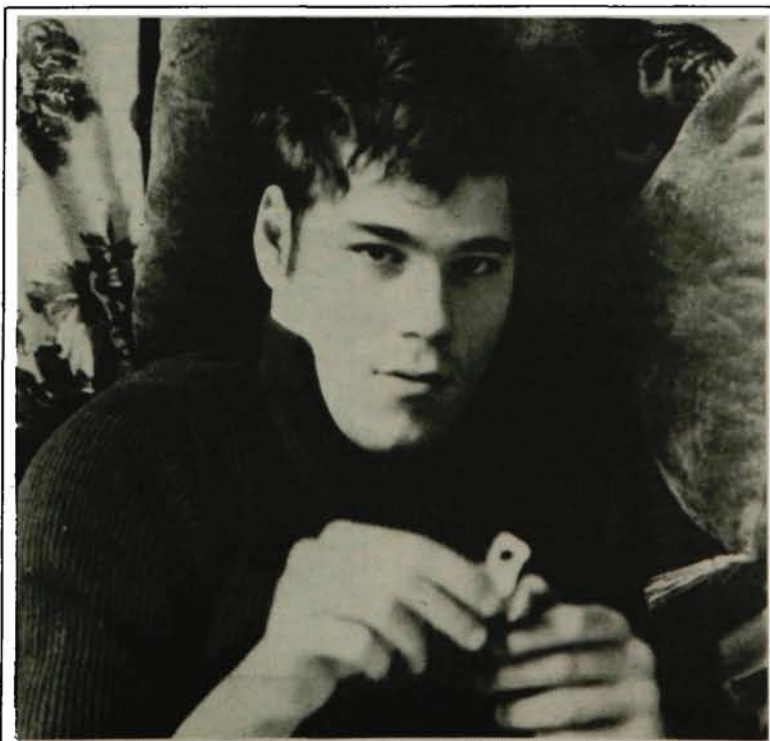
usual *cinéma vérité* sense of presence, but the films also produce a sense of universality, an appeal to the brotherhood of viewer and viewed. Is this endemic to the form of *cinéma vérité*? Are we all soul mates facing a ubiquitous camera crew?

The exact opposite tack was taken by Ted Remerowski, who has just completed a series of made-for-television China films. Touted by his boss as the next Donald Brittain, Remerowski does indeed seem to be working on Brittain's urbane, sardonic approach to his subject. China, as he sees it, is not simply a never-never land of mesmerized model workers. Along with Coca-Cola, one finds unemployment, juvenile delinquency and the embittered victims of the Cultural Revolution. The film on Shanghai opens with the bad old days of "no dogs and Chinamen allowed." It ends in a "foreigners only" nightclub.

Added to this German/French/English triologue will be a Spanish voice. Santiago Alvarez is approximately number three on the list of people I would most like to meet in this world. A founder of the Cuban cinema, Alvarez has spent the last 20 years redesigning the documentary to meet the changing needs of his revolutionary society. Although his work is seldom seen in North America (guess why), Alvarez has enjoyed major retrospectives most everywhere else. If Grierson can rectify the situation - particularly in English Canada - it will be doing a good day's work.

In a similar vein, Martha Rosler's experiments in video documentary are too little known in this country. Rosler, who teaches at New York University, comes from a background in photography, the plastic arts and performance pieces. Her videotapes are, among other things, essays on the medium's ability to convey the reality of its subjects. In *Vital Statistics of a Citizen Easily Obtained*, Rosler herself is the subject of a static camera that watches two anonymous technicians measure every conceivable dimension of her presence. *Losing* is a scripted interview with actors who are obviously too young to be the parents of a recently deceased teenage anorexic. What I'd like to talk about at Grierson is the tension Rosler creates between the obvious lie of the interview situation and the poignancy of the seemingly factual information being presented.

This same tension is one of the aspects of Robert Duda's film, *D.P.* Again, the actor, portraying the original subject in this case a Ukrainian displaced person - is far too young to be the man in question. Yet intercut through the actor's monologue are images that attempt to bridge (or prove the impossibility of bridging) the gap between the teller and



● Acts of grace in filming the family: *The Boy Who Turned Off*

Seth Feldman, past president of the Film Studies Association of Canada, teaches film at Western University.





● A labour of love: documenting the life and the music of Bix Beiderbecke (fourth from right) in *Bix*

the tale. A photograph of someone who appears to be the original D.P. ("displaced person") is placed on an animation stand, is marked up, is scribbled upon by a baby. The actor's image is subjected to superimposed graphics. The anger that spews forth from the monologue is illustrated in black and white silence by a woman practicing a martial arts exercise.

Like Rosler and Dudar, Nette Wilde's work will be useful for beginning a discussion of acting in documentary film. An actress herself, Wilde recently completed a videotape entitled *Right to Fight* around her own guerilla theatre performance, *Buy, Buy Vancouver*. Made during the recent West Coast real estate boom, *Right to Fight* deftly incorporates the actual villains and victims of a housing crisis into the original theatrical caricatures. The tape's energy and vivacity also makes a model for low-budget, regionally topical production.

The same may be said for Lynn Corcoran's *In Our Own Backyard*. Based at Media Study Buffalo, Corcoran spent two years following the fight of the Love Canal area residents to obtain some sort of compensation for the loss of their homes and health. As the residents become more proficient in their media manipulation, our sympathy is almost diverted to the harassed American bureaucrats who realize that they might well face the same fight at another 6,000 former dump sites. One reason that the tape's topic is especially relevant to those who gather at Niagara-on-the-Lake for the Grierson Seminar is that their drinking water is extracted just a bit downstream from the site of the events depicted. A better reason for the presentation, though, is Corcoran herself. More than a proficient and articulate documentarian, she is the producer of *The Frontier*, WNEB's survey of new work in Southern Ontario and Western New York. As such, Corcoran sees as much Canadian film as anyone and sees it with a particularly keen eye.

Back to performance. Early on in the programming of Grierson, I turned to Sig Gerber, the new executive producer of "For the Record." ("For the Record" has been praised elsewhere as the last safe refuge for talented Canadian filmmakers. I will praise it here for its contributions to the topical documentary.) Gerber, in turn, introduced me to Alan Burke, producer of the best of last year's "For the Records." Don Shebib's *By Reason of Insanity*. Burke, like Gerber, came to "For the Record" from CBC's Current Affairs. It is their work in making use of that documentary background to reorient the series that is going to be coming out in the context of Burke's Grierson presentation.

More on performance. I've invited Anne Wheeler with *A War Story*. The film has had a rough reception, and, indeed, it has its faults. To my mind, the area of *A War Story*'s greatest potential interest - Wheeler's relationship to her father's memory - is not sufficiently developed. Nor can the grim realities of her father's experiences in a Japanese P.O.W. camp overcome the fact that her subject has been stolen from her by innumerable fictionalizations. This said, the film does more right than wrong. The acted sequences in the P.O.W. camp recreate an historical situation with a skill and economy rarely seen in English-Canadian period pieces. And the technique of using the recreated sequences intercut with "witnesses" is fundamentally sound (despite *Reds*).

Another labour of love is the film that is going to be the most attractive Canadian entry in this year's festivals in Montreal and Toronto: Brigitte Berman's *Bix*. Berman, a producer at CBC's "Take 30," put five years of her life and virtually everything she owned into this two-hour biography of jazz innovator Bix Beiderbecke. Beiderbecke, who burned himself out and died at the age of 28, would have appreciated the obsessive effort. Berman's thoroughness in collecting every audio-visual artifact

of her subject, and her enormously sensitive editing, makes it a quintessential professional performance.

Is *Bix* a priority one or priority two (as the Festival premiere will take place two months before Grierson)? I don't know. The 200 films and tapes rolled in as promised; my sense of critical judgement began to develop its own case of vertigo. I remembered that you can show you favourite films to your favourite person only to find him/her leaning over a paper bag when the lights come on.

What saved me is the enormous reservoir of talented people and their endless capacity for acts of grace. Take Larry Kurnarsky in his film, *The Boy Who Turned Off*. Kurnarsky documents the enormous pressures endured by his parents during the 20-year confinement of his autistic brother. In one scene, after one of his parents' innumerable fights, Kurnarsky's mother runs to her bedroom, the *cinéma vérité* crew hot on her heels. It is Kurnarsky himself who walks out from behind the camera to close the bedroom door, leaving the woman to her solitary suffering.

Or take Barry Greenwald and his film *Taxi!* The reticent genius who won a Palme d'Or for his student film, *Metamorphosis*, spent three years driving a taxi. The result is haunting night shots of unknown Toronto streets, marvelous testimony from drivers and passengers and just a touch of mandatory NFB information backgrounding (why, for heaven's sake, do we have to know exactly how many medallions there are in Toronto?). The result is a film strangely reminiscent of the best of Unit B, right down to the low-key jazz score.

Anne Cubitt's *Treaty 8 Country* (which I've discussed in an earlier Cinema Canada) and John Paskevitch and Michael Mirus' *Ted Baryluk's Grocery* (also previously reviewed) were similar examples of their makers' acute sensitivity to their subjects. And then there is the work of two men whose consistent

professionalism perhaps causes us to take them for granted. I've booked Bob Lang's *Childhood's End* and Bob Fresco's *Steady as She Goes*. The first film is a textbook example of how to gain access to a painful and difficult subject, in this case, teenage suicide. *Steady as She Goes*, in which Toronto pensioner George Fulfit builds the most complicated boat ever put into a bottle, is simply the most delightful work of the season.

I envy Fulfit's sense of achievement. Two weeks after my deadline for programming Grierson, too much of the schedule is still up in the air. I am also hoping to bring Kenneth Trodd, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) producer who has been in the forefront of the development of television docu-drama. Trodd will be bringing the work of Roland Joffe, whose films *The Spongers* and *United Kingdom* caused a good deal of stir at the recent Input conference. At that same conference, a young Danish documentarian named Ebbe Preisler attracted considerable attention with *Your Neighbour's Son*. Part interviews, part acted recreations, that film documented the training of torturers in Greece. He too is on the probable list.

Beyond the probables and the people who never return phone calls is a large pool of films which, depending upon a hundred variables, will or will not be there. The final schedule - as any idiot should have known and I know now - will be settled after the last participant has departed. Whatever that final schedule, though, I promise to feel I have cheated some of the unbelievably large number of bright, talented people who showed me their work. Next year. ●

*The Grierson Film Seminar will take place November 7-13 at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Anyone interested may attend either on a residential or day-pass basis. For further information, contact Grierson Film Seminars, Ontario Film Association, P.O. Box 366, Station Q, Toronto, Ontario M4T 2M5.*