

BYRON BLACK

by clancy



Infinity as a studio is the creation of Byron Black's sense of humour and dedication to the vast concept of film. His films, often not considered films, run the gamut from an instant barrage of 35 frames of motion picture film put together in a slide to negotiate the scientific precepts of film as such and transcend them to a carefully keyed slide/sound presentation to a motion picture shot at phenomenally slow speeds to capture the essential rhythms hitherto unseen in traditional film.

Byron Black has been working in film since 1964 and "in a heavy duty way since 1969." He arrived in Canada from California four years ago and is working on his citizenship. He has two feature films to his credit (*The Master Of Images* and *The Holy Assassin*) as well as numerous short presentations and slide movies. He has also made commercials in Rio to escape the lovely winter weather of Vancouver. They were never aired. He also has his own television show on Cable in Vancouver.

Listening to other filmmakers speak on Black, as I had the opportunity to at the Canadian Film Symposium held at the University of Manitoba earlier this year, you rapidly form the impression that not only is Byron Black the most notorious Canadian filmmaker but also the most maligned. After talking with Byron Black and seeing his exhibition, *Infinity Lights Up*, his competence as a filmmaker and understanding of the medium are more than apparent.

Let us travel through infinity as Black lights up on Black.

What is Infinity Studio?

Infinity Studio, like all of my work, is kind of a joke because infinity is a vast concept which the finite mind cannot grasp by definition. But, the studio is a conscious delineation – Infinity Studio – and the prefix is 'an', An Infinity Studio, because there are many infinity studios as a matter of fact. My infinity studio is concerned with film, video and live action as well as other media.

Such as?

Since I've gotten back into working Cable Vision and got my own TV show, I've gotten back into making slides for example. I didn't make transparencies for ten years, with very few exceptions, and now, suddenly, I've started to get very interested in making transparencies again. More in the 35mm and 2 1/4 format and collaging. For example, I use 16mm transparencies, motion picture film, and I mount it in 2 1/4 glass slide mounts for a movie of 35 frames. So you have 35 individual pictures and you have a micropheesh style so that the media more and more tended to inter-relate for me. Some of the slides in the show today (*Infinity Lights Up* at the Canadian Film Symposium III) were condensed from 12 inch colour transparencies from various observatories and they're quite lovely images but none of them are infinity.

You're from the West coast, right? There seems to be a lot happening out there in the arts.

We're very busy. We're called the talented losers because we are all very creative and we're all doing quite original things we think. But there's no money happening. So, everyone's starving in a very genteel fashion. I've often thought of putting a disclaimer and a thank-you at the start of my films: The producers of this film offer their grateful thanks to the Unemployment Insurance Commission of Canada, without whose kind and unconscious co-operation this motion picture would never have been made. U.I.C. Motion Pictures. However, UIC is starting to be rather thin because a hundred dollars a week was quite fat two years ago. It was okay, but last year it was

tough and this year it's ridiculous on a hundred bucks a week. And yesterday (at the Film Symposium in Winnipeg) we sat there and listened to Chalmers Adams about feeding the egos of the filmmakers and they've got to have \$400,000 and \$500,000 and \$600,000. I'm saying to myself, 'What kind of dynasty does this guy come from? It's like some kind of space warp.'

The big money ideas seem to get bigger the farther east you get in Canada.

The big money ideas are quite prolific. It's a feast or famine business and as a business, I think, it's the business part of it that has killed film. Because I'm a magician. The nature of film was perverted and subverted and derailed and distracted and totally ruined after about 1920. What happened was motion picture, movie, kino, cinema started off as basically magic lantern acts and the work of the early guys was totally magical. As a matter of fact Melies was a magician himself and he used cinema in a magic fashion. The early filmmakers were either P.T. Barnum types or vaudeville hustlers or people who were intrigued with the idea you could put transparent frames up there and start to run them and see them in motion. Mybridge, the early crank machine people and the early movies were far-out. Hey! There's a fire down the street. Quick, get the leading lady and get the camera and we'll go down and figure out some kind of plot while the fire engine's putting out the fire. So they got into their truck and rushed down to the fire and they got out and they thought very fast and said: What if your old mother's in there. You think she's in there but she's actually not in there and you start to wail and scream to the firemen, right? Then, she comes running down the street. So they filmed that and they created the story around improvised situations but also around structured situations at the same time.

Couldn't that at times be a conflicting thing?

In terms of the I Ching it's part of the dynamic balance of the universe. There is no such thing as accidents, there is coincidence. Coincidence means the intersection of two lines of force in time and space. In Jung's term this is called synchronicity and that made movies a live wire medium. Okay?

What do you see as the currents underlining present day film?

Well, there are subversive currents running through film today and one of them is home movies. I think you're going to find in the next few years the emergence of the home movie as a great art form and culture form and anthropological depository. Whenever I have showings and I show home movies it's always devastating because a home movie from 1950 looks like one million BC Atlantis. The consciousness and the clothes and the people and their self-conscious gestures are so completely different. Anyway, the home movie thing developed the 8mm industry and the 16mm industry and in the 60s you've got college kids with movie cameras making experimental films, loaded on acid and rock'n'roll and doing far-out films. This was happening all through the years by the way.

Experimental film has always been with us on the outside.

Yeah, experimental film was happening from the early days but always in the underground and on the outside. But in the early 60s it started to happen on a big scale and then you had television coming along and the effect of television is unspeakably vast, in terms of the actual physical, physiological, psychological, psychic mutation

of the human consciousness.

What is the effect of all this on film?

Those things have now lead to the point where, theoretically, and in fact, the medium is becoming very sophisticated. Small recording devices, wireless microphones, portable 16mm cameras, 16mm stock which looks so beautiful when blown onto a gigantic screen such that you've got the quality you couldn't get 35 years ago and fairly inexpensively, so that your average middle class citizen can go out and make a movie for himself in 16mm or super-8. Super-8 is beginning to get to be a fantastic medium because super-8 is getting very very good. It's getting into sync sound and into the professional category.

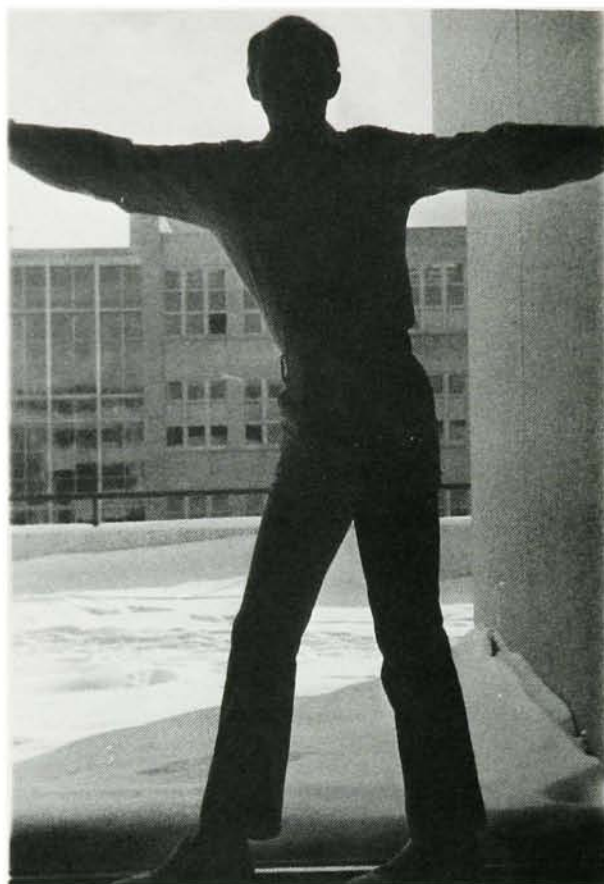
How does this relate to things like the Canadian Film Symposium happening now?

This conference is highly irrelevant to what is happening in the society at large. This conference is devoted, in terms of the participation of most people here, to trying to revive and sustain this dinosaur. What Len Klady called the dinosaur of motion picture production. It's totally obsolete. It's like the railroads — which is a large physical plant, old fashioned thinking, over-paid professionals, too much diversification and too much specialization. They're talking about \$500,000 budgets and there are people starving to death in the streets of India and Africa and South America. In Canada there are people who are hard-up, and the large motion picture theatre, which is a palace of some sort — a palace of fantasies — well, it's lost out. It's just not happening anymore. What's happening now is television and people wanting to see very specific kinds of things so the only way the big theatres manage to survive, apart from their land value which is considerable, is by showing specially prepared numbers.

I don't see how this really relates to the kind of films being made now. Is that all there is to it?

No. The problem is that most filmmakers themselves are basically very troubled people and they're full of confusion and they're full of unripe ego and they're full of a lot of things which they think they have to work out on the screen but they often don't admit this. So what you have is a combination of commercial intent with self-therapy and one eye on the box-office and one eye on what hit last year on Broadway or what was last year's best novel and one eye on one's own problems. As a matter of fact, as a filmmaker I tend to hang around mostly with musicians because the way I create film is much the same as the way they create music. You get a riff. A bass line. You improvise from there and you jam with other people. You push and you pull. Each person lets the whole thing be influenced by everybody else. As opposed to: I'm the director and you sit over there and you smile this way and so on and so on. Few films are created that way because the dynamics are very static and very ordered and most filmmakers — the kind of personality which tends to drip into filmmaking — are very authoritarian. Most of the filmmakers are people who need attention on a vast scale. What I'm saying in brief is that filmmaking tends to attract a very unhealthy kind of personality. That isn't said in a prejudicial sense, it's said in an experiential sense. That is, in terms of musicians or visual artists for that matter, filmmakers who call themselves filmmakers per se, a lot of them are in trouble, they're drifting.

With all this in mind how would you define film, as such?



All film is propaganda.

Would you like to elaborate on that a little, if you don't mind?

All motion picture is propaganda and one like **Triumph Of The Will**, for example, is very useful because it shows us in a very naked sense something which works on us and something which is magic on us and tends to convert us to something which we are anti-thetically opposed to and we are able to see that. All film is like that. Any filmic statement is propaganda because you're looking at it on a gigantic screen in a darkened room. The stroboscopic effect of the motion picture has a physiological hypnotic effect on the human brain. You see, it's a magic lantern, but the message creeps through too.

A praying mantis sitting in there would see discreet flashes of light and then a flash of light again. Persistence of vision is paralleled by persistence of concept. What you get in motion picture is discreet image and discreet concept. The successful motion picture will let you sew together discreet images and discreet shots into a continuous flow. That's the idea of cutting. You cut. The professional editor says, a cut perceives a bad cut. The cut should be unconscious. The images, the idea, should be unconscious. I think it's an exercise in unconsciousness and what I work in is called the theatre of consciousness because it's a kind of an awareness and it's using cinema to heighten awareness not to deaden it, and that's what people have been fed and they are used to having their awareness deadened by the big silver screen.

In other words, what you're working with is film as stimulus.

Film as stimulus. Film as catalyst. Yes. For psychic and spiritual change — it's about time. Movies, by and large, because of their history and their tradition and the fact that they're escapism don't deal with real thoughts and fears and I'd like to find some way to deal with them and still keep the entertainment.

Because you've got to entertain and . . .

Awaken. Godard's favorite statement is, 'Film is truth 24 times a second.'

How does the experimental film, like your own work, come across to the audience?

Film for the vast majority of people, even if they are artistically inclined, means movies. The movies. And if you're trapped in a dark room with a lot of strangers sitting around you and there's something strange happening on the screen and it's not the movies, then it's difficult for the average person to deal with. Which gets me to my next point. It's very different from music, and the musical medium is my ideal in terms of one which the visual medium could parallel in its creation. People are very open towards new musical experience. The musical experience isn't necessarily challenging intellectually the way the visual experience is. It works on the heart as opposed to the mind. Music tends to work intuitively and you tend to accept the sound experience without questioning. You can have more than one thing happening at the same time. The visual thing is totally linear. It's intellectual so you tend to get your teeth in it intellectually and to challenge it at every point. You want to understand it. You don't have to understand music. You can listen to Pink Floyd and not understand what's happening, you just accept it.

So, you would prefer an audience to approach film in a totally musical way? With total openness?

Sure. I've tried to make films for that sort of approach and it's been disastrous. Audiences have hated it and hated it and many have loved it.

What films have you made? Could you tell me a little about them?

The Master Of Images was my first 35mm motion picture film, a feature length experimental spiritual comedy which opened in Vancouver in October 23, 1972 and totally wiped out the critics and the audience because they weren't prepared for it. And they didn't like it. And they felt ripped off. A small number of people appreciated what it was all about in spite of the fact I was saying in the movie, it's only a movie. The second one was called **The Holy Assassin**. It was 65 minutes in length as opposed to 90 because I also realized that the people these days want their fast-food entertainment. They want things to begin. Get the message out. And finish. And they want to get out. Entertaining somebody for 90 minutes is a very tough number unless it's a concert.

What were they about?

The Holy Assassin is the story about a spaceman who's missed dimensions and crashed on earth and finds this planet full of savages and dope-crazed cocaine dealers who are out to rip him off and he tries to escape time again and he eventually has to learn to deal with earth consciousness and to live here. Which is an allegory, that we're reborn into earth form and we have to deal with it for better or for worse.

How long did you work on these films?

The Master Of Images I shot with a group from the Vancouver free university in the summer of '72 and it

was very much of a shooting spree. Total improvisation. I had this idea about a bald-headed, nutty, zany spiritual master who also was a bit of a phony. Who was the master of images by the way. Who's also making the movie (laughter). And these people who come to him for spiritual enlightenment and feel totally ripped off yet enjoying it and not knowing quite where they are. That was shot in the summer of '71 and put together much by a two-man team. Like, total filmmaking. Shooting, editing, putting the sound tracks together and mixing and so on. Premiered in October '72 and sank out of sight. The second feature started in March of '72 and it was completed over a two year period in bits and pieces. A hundred feet there. Five hundred feet here. It premiered in March of '74 and **The Holy Assassin**, my second feature, has the distinction of being rejected at the fifth annual experimental film competition in Brussels, Belgium.

Why?

I guess they didn't like it.

It must seem quite an honour to have been rejected since you're an experimental filmmaker entering an experimental filmmaking competition.

Lots of films don't make it there, actually. Anyways, they're both very high energy, mixed level, noisy sound tracks, high speed, collage structure and I'm beyond that now.

A barrage of images concept?

You have to sew it together yourself. They're both very unfinished movies. They're like music in that they leave you an opening to fill in your own content. The problem is that people aren't used to that by and large and they want everything supplied. Most movies give you so much redundancy that you could go to sleep and still get the picture because everything builds to get the shot. The sound. The cutting. The editing. The lighting. The movement. The dialogue. Everything goes towards the same direction.

What you're attempting is to compose your images on the screen in a totally musical way and sensitivity?

I'm a latter day twentieth century man who lives in the era of cassette tape-recorders and fast food and videotape technology and so I like to do things in a very very Zen lightning fashion. Fast, easy, cheap and effective.

You said your direction has changed since the two features were made. What direction are you moving in now?

The idea is growth. The idea is that — what I'm trying to do is catalyse my own psychic and spiritual growth. What I was doing at the time was that through the dynamic and psychological manipulation of the medium of myself and of other people and of the images. Those changes definitely occurred and there was growth. There was hybridization of perceptual structures and the next stage I went into was — I've always been on a strong spiritual bent. In '72 I embarked on a couple of devotional yoga paths and at the moment I'm involved with yoga meditation and Hindu meditation and also Tibetan Buddhist meditation. The 'I' is not doing it anymore. It's being done to me and through me by the higher forces and I'm trying to dedicate my film work to serving these higher forces. It's not easy.

Some people might label that as bullshit hype.

Fine. It's a free country. It's a free universe for that matter. It's a free infinity! Radio Free Infinity is on the air! □