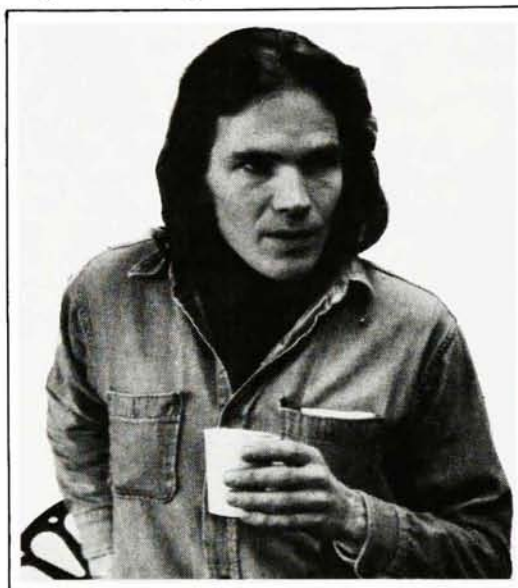


david rimmer

# honesty of vision

Publicly, experimental filmmaking would seem to be on the wane, having been eliminated from the Student Film Awards and from the Canadian Film Awards this year. The spirit of the '60s is gone. But the films keep on being made nevertheless. George Koller speaks to David Rimmer, one of Canada's best known experimental filmmakers.

by George Csaba Koller



David Rimmer

His films have a clarity of purpose that is the mark of a true artist. Whether they depict the entire macro/microscopic universe – his first film **Square Inch Field** – or simply the view out of a Vancouver warehouse window – **Canadian Pacific I and II** – David Rimmer's cinematic works possess an honesty of vision from concept to execution. He is perhaps the best known Canadian film artist, next to Michael Snow, outside this country. He has gained the mandatory recognition in New York. Gene Youngblood, the author of *Expanded Cinema*, wrote of one of his films in 1970: "If **Surfacing** had been made in New York, Rimmer would be famous today. As it is he'll have to wait a bit, but this young artist is destined for recognition." Roger Greenspun in the *New York Times* called him "very, very good," and the *Village Voice* lauded him as "one of the most exciting current avant-garde filmmakers."

A native of Vancouver, David Rimmer graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1963, majoring in economics and mathematics. He had a vague idea of going into business eventually, but took two years off to hitchhike through Asia and Europe. During his travels he picked up a regular 8mm movie camera in Gibraltar. He returned to Vancouver with the realization that he did not want to be a businessman. Instead, he returned to UBC to get a BA in

English, then on to Simon Fraser for an MA in the same subject. He felt frustrated, since he wasn't doing anything creative, so he picked up his movie camera and proceeded to make a film with some friends.

He quit university, and decided to try filmmaking full time. Joining the industry did not appeal to him, but an opportunity arose when Stan Fox invited him and some other beginners (Tom Shandel, Gary Lee Nova, Sylvia Spring) to contribute films to an experimental series on the CBC. They were given some out of date color stock, and Rimmer took 600 feet of film and made his first serious film, **Square Inch Field**, in 1968. This happens to be my personal favourite of all his work. It's a staccato montage of faces and mystical symbols, embracing earth, water, fire, and air in cosmic balance. The mattes and double exposures were all done in the camera by Rimmer, who was learning while he was doing the film.

"I've never been to film school, and I didn't know that you weren't allowed to do certain things. So I was able to improvise and find short cuts. I learned how to do my own opticals, my own travelling mattes. Then I made **Migration**,

*George Csaba Koller, former editor/publisher of Cinema Canada, is presently at work on a research project on Canadian experimental films. He hopes to write a book on the subject next year.*



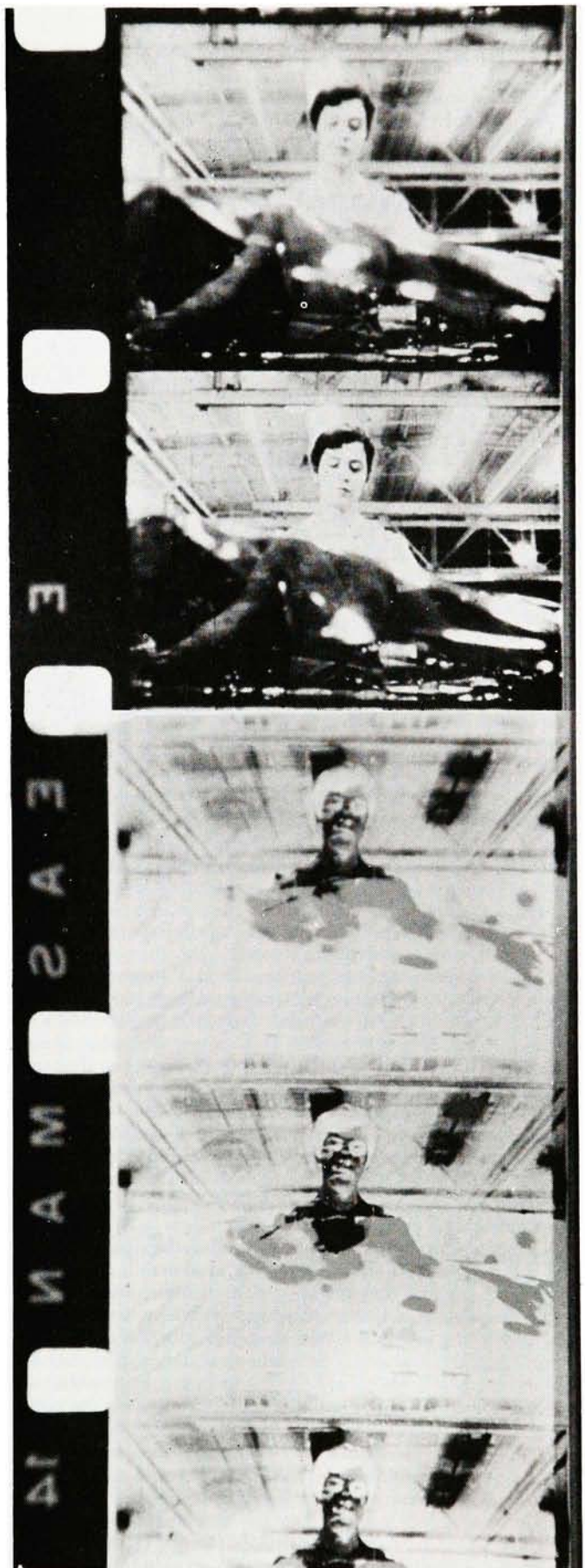
which was mainly an editing film. A lot of very, very short cuts, two, three, four frame cuts. I showed it and people seemed to like it, and I got some more confidence and applied for a Canada Council grant. To my surprise I got it, and that encouraged me more. So the next year I made three films: **Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper**, **Surfacing on the Thames**, and **The Dance**. These all originated from stock footage."

Stock footage of a certain action is looped in the optical printer and rephotographed at various speeds with different filters to create an entirely new film. How did the idea of using loops first occur to Rimmer? "I guess it began when I first started making films in the late sixties and people were doing light shows and multi media presentations. I started using loops there just as a constant image. You have a number of loops on a number of projectors going at the same time. We'd be playing with the loops while they were being projected, putting color filters over them and superimposing two loops. I must have wanted to preserve that somehow, to make a record of that, because multi media things are transitory. By making an actual film recording those changes, it goes through a process of overlays and it becomes another film."

The basic image in **Cellophane Wrapper** is a simple one of a woman raising and lowering a sheet of transparent plastic in front of the camera. This is repeated many, many times, and eventually positive and negative loops of the same action are overlaid and color filters are added until the image disintegrates into an abstract pattern of dancing particles of light. Although it looks like an optical printer was used, Rimmer achieved the outstanding special effects just by the use of two projectors and rephotographing the screen. Kristian Nordstrom, writing in the *Village Voice* considers **Cellophane Wrapper** the most exciting non-narrative film she has ever seen, and goes on to describe it: "Mechanically repetitive, factory-like sounds increase in tempo, building up to a machine-gun-like effect. As the sound intensifies, he introduces a flicker to heighten the visual excitement. Then he gradually adds color – blue and green first, building up to a climax with bright flashes of yellow and red. The sound changes to crashing ocean waves with a choral interlude. Gongs ring to announce the final sequence in which the images become polarized into grainy outlines, like drawings in white or colored chalk which gradually disintegrate and disappear. The film resembles a painting floating through time, its subject disappearing and re-emerging in various degrees of abstraction."

**Cellophane Wrapper** affords an experience to the viewer, which is not unlike taking the drug LSD. Were drugs at all influential in Rimmer's artistic vision? "No more than drugs affected everybody at that certain point in time. The mid and late sixties were acid times and everybody was taking drugs. Even if you weren't, it was in the air, you couldn't avoid it. So in that sense I guess I was influenced. But I got tired of that psychedelic type of film. People stopped doing light shows. And the film after **Cellophane** I tried to simplify more, to narrow it down, make it more subtle. The acid revolution was like an explosion, nobody could escape it. And when it settled, it had changed a lot of people. I think a lot of people just started to look more closely at things. Even one at a time, rather than everything at once."

Certainly **Surfacing on the Thames** is an example of looking at one thing very closely. Roger Greenspun wrote in the *New York Times*: "Perhaps Rimmer's best quality is his immensely appreciative irreverence for the filmed image and for his own ways of reshaping it. Thus, **Surfacing on the Thames**, the loveliest Rimmer film (and the cleverest Rimmer title) shows a river boat slowly steaming past the Houses of Parliament – so slowly that it almost seems not to be moving, and surrounded by such a grainy luminous mistiness that



Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper



## Filmography

### David Rimmer's Filmography

- Square Inch Field**, 1968, Color, 13 minutes.  
**Migration**, 1969, Color, 11 minutes.  
**Landscape**, 1969, Color/Silent, 7 minutes.  
**Surfacing on the Thames**, Color/Silent, 8 minutes.  
**The Dance**, 1970, B & W, 5 minutes.  
**Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper**, 1970, Color, 8 minutes.  
**Treefall**, 1970, B & W/Silent, 5 minutes.  
**Blue Movie**, 1970, Color/Silent, 6 minutes.  
**Seashore**, 1971, B & W/Silent, 12 minutes.  
**Real Italian Pizza**, 1971, Color, 12 minutes.  
**Fracture**, 1973, Color/Silent, 11 minutes.  
**Watching for the Queen**, 1973, B & W/Silent, 11 minutes.  
**Canadian Pacific**, 1974, Color/Silent, 11 minutes.  
**Canadian Pacific II**, 1975, Color/Silent, 11 minutes.  
**West Coast Workprint**, 1969 -?, Color/Silent, 2½ hours.

All of the above films, with the exception of the last one, are available for rental or sale from the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 406 Jarvis St. Toronto.

one critic is supposed to have thought he was looking at a Turner painting rather than at film footage. Gradually the surface of the film begins to wrinkle slightly, to spot, to show minor blemishes – in a sense, to assert itself above and before the rich density it contains. The gesture is tentative and discreet, but it is also unsettling and liberating in ways that seem central to the gentle invocations of dissolution that are a basic feature of David Rimmer's world."

Kirk Tougas, writing in *Take One*, describes Rimmer's next film. "The Dance is composed primarily of a loop of two dancers, rapidly careening around a dance floor in perfect step. The distant, unchanging repetition of the loop accentuates the ridiculous (and thus hilarious) aspects of their mesmerizing twirling patterns and synchronmesh footwork. The result is an unbalancing comedy." By this time Rimmer had built his own optical printer. He also got involved with a group called Intermedia, a Canada Council funded experimental arts lab and workshop. "We did a lot of things together, a lot of multi media type of events, where you'd have filmmakers and dancers and poets and painters and sculptors all working together. I made a couple more short films: **Blue Movie** and **Treefall**, which were made as part of a big performance Intermedia would have each year at the Vancouver Art Gallery. **Blue Movie** was done as an environmental piece; I made a small geodesic dome twelve feet in diameter, and this five-minute loop was projected from the ceiling of the Gallery down onto that dome. The image was visible on the outside of the dome and also the inside, since it was covered in cheesecloth, so it went right through and was visible on the floor which was white foam. So you could go into the dome and lie down and watch the movie on the inside and it would also be on yourself. And **Treefall** was done as part of a dance performance. It was projected on a very large screen in the middle of a large room in the Gallery and the audience sat on either side of the screen. The screen was actually made up of strips of surveyors tape side by side so the dancers could pass through it. And that worked on a loop too."

After that Rimmer went to New York, because his wife is a dancer and that's where the big choreographers are, and also to get his own films shown and to see other films. He lived and worked there for three years, making **Real Italian Pizza**, **Seashore**, **Fracture**, and **Watching for the Queen**.

Several Canada Council grants kept him going, as well as free lance film work. Also, by this time, he was getting paid to show his films at such places as Millenium, Film Forum, Yale, Harvard, Sarah Lawrence and Bard, as well as Toronto, Montreal and Halifax.

**Real Italian Pizza** was photographed over a period of nine months, using a fixed camera, looking out the window of Rimmer's New York apartment at the Pizza parlor across the street. There's always a little group of street people gathered in front of the store, and the way they relate to one another provides the dramatic content of the film. The passage of time is the other key element, as snow falls, is swept away, a fire truck pulls up, the firemen go in for coffee, while on another day the police come and arrest one of the street people. Passers-by scurry past, a black youth does an improvised dance, and all the while the Coca-Cola and the Pepsi signs are ever present. Rimmer fragments the movements of the people as they fight, embrace and hustle each other, sometimes even speeding up the action, or slowing it down, always concentrating on little human touches that make the viewing of **Real Italian Pizza** a worth while experience.

**Seashore** and **Watching for the Queen** are again loop films made in the optical printer, while **Fracture** was blown up from 8mm and deals with the play of light on a very simple series of events. In **Seashore** a group of women in long bathing costumes approach the water and gingerly test it with their feet, over and over again. The permutations of this basic image, optically doctored and layered, raise this simple action to a meaningful level. In **Watching for the Queen** we see a crowd of faces peering expectantly at approaching royalty, but the frames go by painfully slowly at first, then faster and faster. In **Fracture** the slight movements of a woman and a baby rising somewhere in the woods and the opening of a cabin door are repeated to enable us to study the changing light patterns and colors.

Four years ago David Rimmer returned to Vancouver to assume a teaching position at the University of British Columbia. He has been teaching film there ever since in the Fine Arts Department. In 1974 he again pointed a camera out a window to film **Canadian Pacific** over a period of time. The film shows a railroad yard in the foreground, usually with a box car or two with Canadian Pacific signs on the side, a stretch of water in the middle, and mountains in the background. Time passing paints a different picture each time, as trains pull in and out, fog rolls over the water, mist blocks out the mountains entirely. A year later Rimmer found a window slightly higher up and made a similar film, **Canadian Pacific II**, which can be projected side by side with the first one for a different perspective. A writer in *Cinema Canada* commented: "Watching the space and noting the rhythmic dissolves of the trains passing, the slower paced movements of ships, the natural rhythms of days and climate, the viewer is mesmerized by the motions and their rhythms."

"I've always been interested in that kind of film. That kind of window film where you place your camera and leave it, over a long period of time. **Canadian Pacific** took about three months. When I moved into that studio I immediately saw the window and thought there could be something done there. What interested me about the shot were the horizontals: train tracks, the water, the mountains, the sky. Very few verticals in it. In a way those four elements would change. From one shot to the next the railway tracks may stay the same, the trains may be in the same position, but the sky would change, the water would change. In some cases the mountains would disappear. Each shot was changing one or more of those elements."

The economics of David Rimmer's type of filmmaking are quite different than the exorbitant costs of making norm-



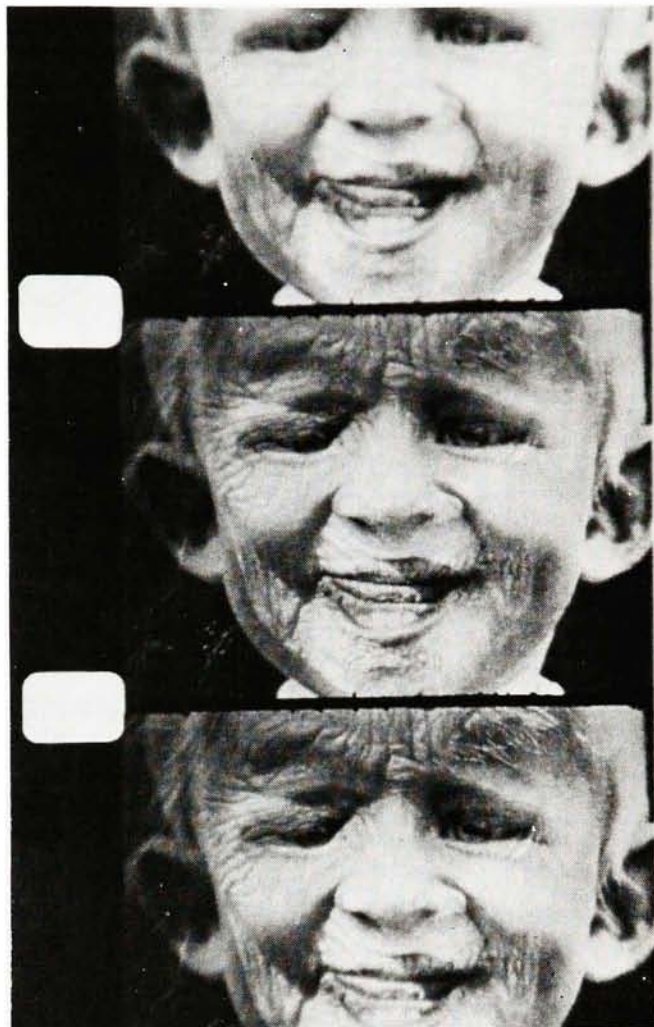
al movies. **Cellophane Wrapper** cost only \$500 to make, and it has been sold to quite a number of galleries and universities. "With film you can keep selling it over and over, because what you're doing is just selling prints, unlike a painting which you sell once and that's that. So that I'm still making money on my first film. And the rentals from the Distribution Centre, which is something you can't count on, it's sort of a bonus that comes every once in a while. But you have to do something else to make money, either get a Canada Council grant, or go on welfare, or drive a taxi, or teach. For the last four years, I have been teaching at UBC, and that seems to be enough money. My films are not expensive to make. It's a big difference from making a feature film. I work in the hundreds, and they work in the tens of thousands."

"The expense in filmmaking comes if you work with actors where you have to reshoot a lot of things, or in a documentary where you have to do a lot of shooting, or where you work with other people, where you have to pay wages. Since I do all the technical stuff myself, except for sound, I don't have all those wages to pay out. I try to do as much of the printing as possible. They just built a contact printer here at the university; it cost us \$23 to build. And it works very well. It takes bipacks, and the registration is perfect. I try to encourage my students to do that and not to rely too much on the industry, on the labs. Trying to find ways around it. Try and skip a lot of those stages that the film industry says you have to go through, stages like workprints. Most filmmakers I know can't afford workprints, and that's quite a saving if you're working in that kind of budget."

Rimmer makes the most of his limitations. Working with original footage sometimes leads to scratches and dirt on the film, but he considers that part of the art, as in **Surfacing on the Thames**. What about a project sometimes referred to as **West Coast Workprint**, which is a diary of a commune in British Columbia? "That's a very long term project; it's been going on for about eight years. I'm involved with a group of people who communally own a piece of land up the coast, and the film is really a film about that community and about those people. And it's mainly a film for those people. I don't show it too much outside that group. It's like a portrait over a long period of time, and I'm going to shoot film there as long as I'm involved with that community. Which could be twenty or thirty years. It's a document of those people and the children and how they're growing up. It's all shot quite straight; I'm not getting into any complicated printing techniques. It's about two and a half hours long now."

How does he classify himself: as a structuralist, conceptualist, minimalist? He'd rather leave that up to the critics to decide. The work comes first, criticism comes later. Does he feel that he has to return to New York to gain further recognition? He doesn't think so, since films travel well, ideas and images can be moved around quickly. How has British Columbia influenced him in his artistic endeavors? "That's where I was born and I grew up. It's the place I feel most comfortable in. You always work from a center, from a place that you know best. In New York I felt a little without roots. I was visiting. Most people in New York are visitors, just passing through. I live in Vancouver at this particular time, and that should be reflected in my work."

Does he find himself working less now in films? "At this particular moment, yes. In the last couple of years I've been doing other things. Last year I did some holography, sculpture, and some work with video. This year I'm dabbling in painting. I never considered myself as a filmmaker, but rather as an artist who's working with film. So I'm free to



Square Inch Field

work in any other kind of medium that I want to. In the past I have worked with environmental sculpture, with sound, and with performance. Film has just been the thing that I've concentrated on. And I have a couple of film projects that are going on now, but they're going slowly, because the painting is more exciting to me. At this moment, it's more immediate. I can go to my studio and paint, and there it is, you can put it on canvas right away, there is no time delay, there's not that machine in between. Technology is not in between, although brushes and canvas and paint are a technology, but it's easier to deal with somehow, than the technology of film."

A lot of people claim that experimental film is a dying art form that was trendy in the sixties and out of place in the seventies. Dealing with young people on a daily basis, as Rimmer is, does he feel that this is true? "The kind of students that I'm working with are fine arts students. They're doing painting and drawing and sculpture and ceramics and film and photography. So they're approaching film in the same way they would approach painting. They're not concerned with making documentaries or features. They're interested in pushing the medium and how they can renew it somehow. Their attitude is still experimental. And some of the students are doing very good work. One of them just got a Canada Council grant. There will always be people who want to present their own vision, their uniquely personal vision of things. Whether it's on film or canvas or as sculpture. They will never be absorbed by any industry." □