MINI - REVIEWS

by Pat Thompson

A PEOPLE UNITED

A teenage boy is walking through a wintry Toronto landscape and his voice-over is heard: "It's like a dream you have and you can't remember the details." The boy, Claudio, tries to recall the Chile he left with his family when he was seven years old, and he looks forward to going back in the summer to visit his relatives.

His father Victor, his mother, and his two younger brothers form a united family and, together with Chilean friends, are dedicated to the land of their birth. Above all, the music of the country serves to unite the expatriates who long to return to their land, who discuss the repressive military rule, and who hope for the democratization of Chile.

Claudio plays the guitar, the flute and the pan pipes. Together, he and his father fashion their own reed instruments from bamboo. The men gather to talk about their childhoods and the plight of their country, but mostly they make wonderfully evocative and lively music. "Just because there is repression, it doesn't mean our songs have to be sad."

As the Grupo Taller they give concerts in small halls and meeting places, striving to keep alive the spirit of Chile in the hearts of their countryfolk, and also entertaining many others who love South American music.

At the close of the film, Claudio leaves the airport for his visit to the reality of everyday life in Chile. He takes along his little brother, remarking that he's a bit mouthy, so he'll have to keep an eye on him.

A charming, heartfelt film from Peter Blow, who knows the Chilean family well and presents them unsentimentally, but in a manner which is full of warmth and understanding. With a minimum of voice-over narration from Claudio, and tiny interviews with his father and mother and some of their friends, a great many nuances of feeling are neatly caught.

p./d./sc. Peter Blow, **cam.** John Dyer, **ed.** Judy Krupanszky, **mus.** Traditional and written by Grupo Taller, **l.p.** the Saldavia family, **running time:** 28 mins, Col. 16mm. **Availability:** Peter Blow (416) 691-8538.

•

A SYMPHONY OF TOYS

The conductor is the "Gumby" character, all rubbery and animated, and the audience is a motley crew of toys — cuddly, wind-up, battery operated — fashioned from old and new materials. At the downbeat, the soundtrack burst forth with a sprightly selection from Rossini's "The Barber of Seville." Carried away by the lively music, the 'audience' gets a mite frolicsome. The toys start to chase each other, run into each other, and a woodpecker does some damage to a baby's head. General mayhem ensues. At the crashing finale, the camera surveys a disaster scene, and the Gumby conductor gets knocked off its feet by a big gorilla.

This engaging little film is the work of a fourth year student in Film Studies at Queen's University. Later in his career it will probably be referred to as "an early fragment", but many months of preparation went into its production. The Gumby figure is animated, while the set movements of the battery and wind-up toys are carefully choreographed, integrated and edited to the music track. All this effort pays off in a fast-paced kaleidoscope of movement and humour. The "cast of thousands" of toys is well-chosen, and a nice touch is the opening and closing title pulled along by a mechanical tricycle and truck respectively.

Selected for showing at the 1985 Canadian Student Film Festival in Montreal.

A film by James Stuart, with Gord McGlyn and Michelle MacLaren. **Running time:** 4½ mins, Col.16mm. **Availability:** James Stuart (416) 927-8104

SCAN LINES

by Joyce Nelson

Television and aura

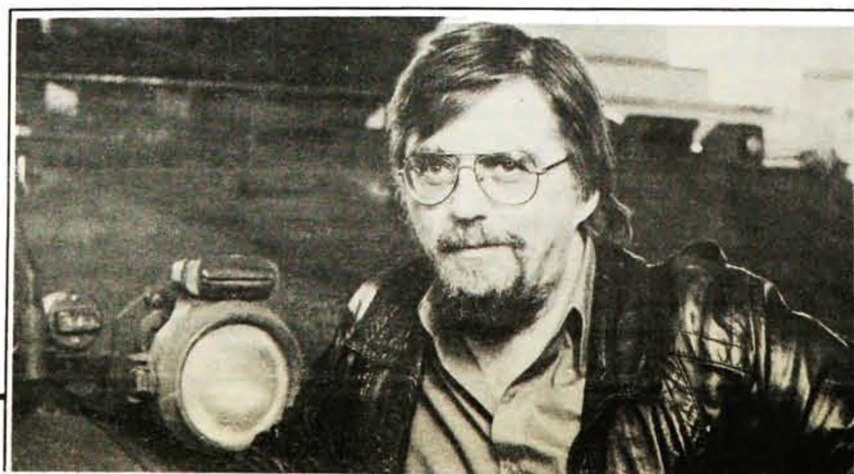
Two CBC programs — Gwynne Dyer's three-part **Defence of Canada** and David Suzuki's **The Nature Of Things** — invite consideration of a crucial aspect of the TV medium. And that aspect has to do with the fact that photographic imagery of any kind cannot capture or convey the aura of living things — the ineffable quality of "presence", or life-force, that living things have, and dead things or objects don't. This has deep repercussions for programming, indeed for all aspects of the medium, and we might briefly explore it by examining both series, Suzuki's which just ended with a show on acid rain (Mar.12), while Dyer's special is still underway as of this writing.

The most accessible insight into the relationship between television and aura comes from author Jerry Mander, whom I interviewed in 1982 on this aspect of his book, *Four Arguments For The Elimination Of Television*. Mander tells the story of working for the Sierra Club in the 1960s, when that organization was hoping to establish a Redwood National Park in order to save the giant redwood trees being logged into extinction. Mander decided to take a TV camera into the forest and shoot images of the majestic trees in order to convey to the public the splendour of a redwood forest. But, says Mander, when the footage was brought back and viewed, "it didn't work at all. There was absolutely no communication we could have with those trees through technology." The imagery of the live trees was flat and unresonant, conveying nothing of the mood of being in a redwood forest, nothing of the splendour and vulnerability of a living thing.

Then Mander decided to go back and shoot images of the stumps of redwoods that had been cut down. "The images of the stumps were more powerful than the live trees," he says. And audiences who saw these images were shocked and horrified by the destruction of the redwood forest. "That," says Mander, "was when I first realized that death is better for television communication than life is."

"When you translate images through technology," Mander continues, "the aura is dropped out and just the image itself remains." Without aura (which can only be experienced in the actual presence of something living) the image is essentially lifeless, merely a detailed husk of an exterior surface. "That means," says Mander, "that the communication of dead imagery or non-alive imagery is more efficient than the communication of living imagery. The object communicates 100% efficiently," since it loses nothing in the process, "whereas the living thing loses its most important quality, which is its life essence." On television, dead objects actually have the advantage because they can be given "surrogate life, artificial life" as advertisers do for products when they have them move around, sing and dance, and imitate living things.

The paradox of **The Nature Of Things** is that it attempts to convey the wonder of nature's living things on a medium that removes aura. Thus, the most successful of Suzuki's programs are arguably those that show the destruction of living things, as in its final program this season, on acid rain. The images of the dying forests in Germany, for example, spoke powerfully in a way that the images of Canada's threatened, but visibly undamaged, forests did not. As Mander points out, the television medium best communicates death and destruction, and program makers in the U.S. have (consciously or not) utilized this fact in their emphasis upon the spectacle of car crashes, explosions, disasters and destruction that characterizes so much American TV. Since television also best conveys the dead object, conferring upon it surrogate life, it is not surprising that, as in shows like **Knight Rider**, the technological object (in this case, the super-car) has become the sidekick for the hero, replacing the formerly human buddy.



Leaving aside the extent to which this central aspect of the medium contributes to a dying world, consider, for a moment, Gwynne Dyer's **Defence of Canada**, currently being broadcast on Sunday evenings on CBC. In its focus on the death-technologies of war, the series is brilliantly suited to the medium's showing all the impressive pieces of hardware that fully overshadow the puny humans around them. Conferred with their artificial "aura" by TV itself, the images of these dead objects rivet attention as no living thing could do on the medium. And it is precisely here that the series creator and host is so excellent. In his use of imagery, Dyer (whom I admire immensely, by the way) seems to capitalize on the fact that his own living aura has been removed by television. His deadpan delivery, ironic understatements, unimpassioned contemplation of World War III, even his noticeably somnambulent movements and walk (which remind me of **Nosferatu**), are exactly the right qualities to bring to this series: a coolness that matches the death technologies under scrutiny, a gaze into the camera that reveals nothing and can meet the icy stare of the video eye, a voice that seems to speak from the series' world of death.

A more visibly impassioned person would seem silly, jumpy or irrelevent next to the stealthy, efficient smoothness of the machines. Such a person, removed of aura, would at best appear like an animated cartoon figure. But Dyer, precisely because of his coolness, his adoption of a dispassionate mask, retains an objectified stature that matches the machines — and, moreover, through the spoken word, subtly undermines their spectacle.