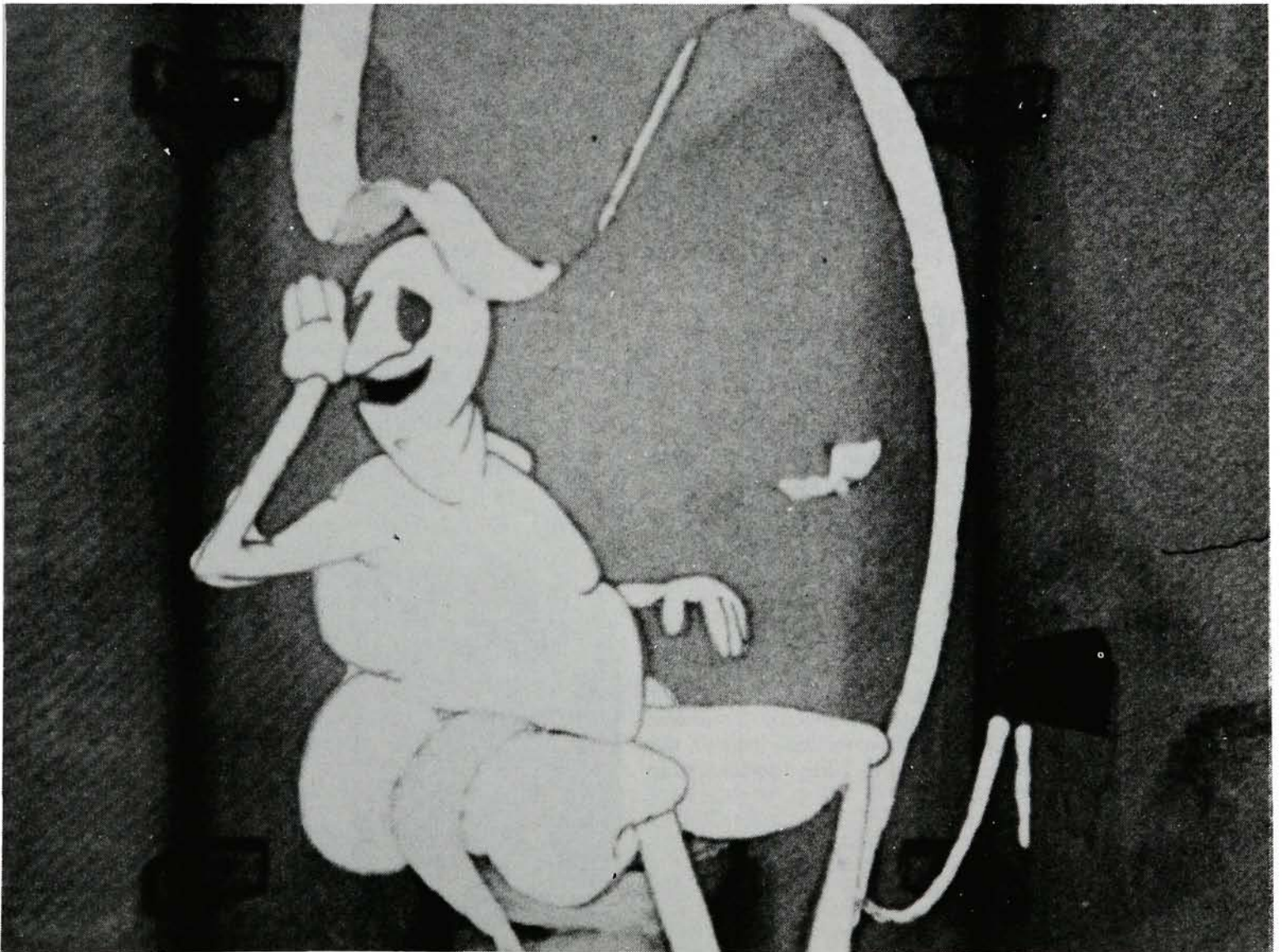


# the seventh canadian student film festival

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by John W. Locke

Some won while many lost. John W. Locke discusses some of the student films, and comments on the awarding – or rather the not awarding – of prizes. He makes some enormous generalizations about what is wrong with student films and then steps aside to let Neal Livingston give us his thoughts on the subject.



**Da Da Da** by Ian Bell, Peter Hodecki, Charles Macrae, G. Gray Miller, Jack Mongovan and Denis Neil from Sheridan College.



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# THE WINNERS

## *Animation First Prize:*

**Da Da Da.** Directors: Ian Bell, Peter Hodecki, Charles Macrae, G. Gray Miller, Jack Mongovan, Denis Neil, Sheridan College.

## *Documentary First and Second Prizes:*

**Thursday Auction.** Director: Rob Wallace, Camera: Andrew Ruhl, Rob Wallace, Conestoga College.

## *Experimental Second Prize:*

**Second Impressions.** Director: Lorne Marin. Camera: Lorne Marin, Concordia University.

## *Scenario Second Prizes:*

**Her Decision.** Director: Glen Salzman. Camera: Rebecca Yates, York University.

**Temporarily Confused.** Director: Ken Ilass. Camera: John Westheuser, Conestoga College.

## *Honourable Mentions:*

**Les Aventures de running shoes.** Director: Claude Laflamme. Camera: Claude Laflamme. Université du Québec.

**The Bet.** Director: Antonio Rizi. Camera: Antonio Rizi. Concordia University.

**Metamorphosis.** Director: Barry Greenwald. Camera: John Westheuser. Conestoga College.

**Tiny.** Director: Franco Battista. Camera: Jean-Pierre Blais. Concordia University.

**Titles for the Tenth International Tournée of Animation.** Director: Jeff Korda, George Ungar, Sheridan College.

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The Seventh Canadian Student Film Festival was held in Montreal from September 24 to 28 under the direction of Serge Losique. Forty-three of the 116 films entered were selected for the four nights of screenings to the jury and the public. This meant that 73 dreams were crushed before the Festival started; but this is inevitable in a national festival with a limited number of screenings and a jury with finite endurance. This year's jury had two honorary presidents, Henri Langlois and Werner Herzog, and seven other illustrious members. Famous Players provided cash for prizes which the jury awarded in four categories – Animation, Documentary, Experimental, Scenario – and as Honourable Mentions.

## Winners and Losers

**Da Da Da**, the first prize film in Animation, is a musical set in a toilet. It managed to combine beautifully drawn characters and totally unexpected events into one of the most successful student animated films I have seen. A song

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*John Locke teaches Cinema in Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts. His areas of specialization are film aesthetics, film criticism and experimental film. He is completing doctorates in Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania and in Cinema Studies at New York University and has published in **Artforum** and **Film Comment**.*

and dance routine may be expected in an animated musical, but this film has it begin in toilet stalls and end with the space transformed into a studio musical set. I think the film reflects an admirable ability to conceive an original, hilarious idea, mate it to wonderfully appropriate animated figures and develop it to a conclusion in less than 2 minutes.

A second Sheridan College animation film received an honourable mention, but evidently was judged not to merit the second prize for the animation category. This film is what its title says it is: **Titles for the Tenth International Tournée of Animation**. A plane – or is it a rocket ship? – moves right to left across the screen for 2 minutes, and as it moves the plane changes from vintage to futuristic while different events occur along its length. It is a very good idea for titles; it gets the announcement made in a style perfectly fitting for an animation tournée. I suspect that the second prize was withheld from it because of quibbling over whether titles can be “a film.”

Three other animation films should be mentioned, and one of these, **Tiny**, was awarded an honourable mention. **Tiny** is a nineteen minute film about a dinosaur. It has remarkable special effects with shots such as a boy climbing onto the back of a car size dinosaur. This was evidently made by using a rear projection system for the live action film of the boy and an animation technique for the clay model dinosaur, because the “outlined in white” effect which would be expected with an amateur matte process is totally absent. The film makes me wonder how a student could have done it. It



**Thursday Auction** by Rob Wallace from Conestoga College.



has funny sections when the visual effects and the roar of the dinosaur work together, but it is too long, and it is not successful as a film. However, Franco Battista clearly has talent and managed the technical aspects better than anyone would have imagined was possible with neither a sizable budget nor experience. If he can achieve more control over the slightly ragged technical quality of this work and restrain himself on the length of his next project, he could really produce a first rate work.

**Dr. Climax**, again from Sheridan College, is a variation on the Frankenstein monster theme. The character of Igor, a frightened, tiny monster, was a joy. I am surprised that neither this film nor the next one I will mention received the second prize for animation. **Une aventure** by Danyele Pate-naude is a classical pixilation student film. The pixilation technique is used to produce a jerky, speeded up motion effect by filming a moving object one frame at a time instead of 24 frames per second. And in this film a biker riding an imaginary motorcycle frantically chases another guy through a park. There is a sequence of amusing encounters between these two and also between the guy and a very tough looking brute in drag as a mother with a baby carriage. The film is not so different in concept from many other student works, but it is well conceived and executed. It is clearly a student film, but it is a good student film.

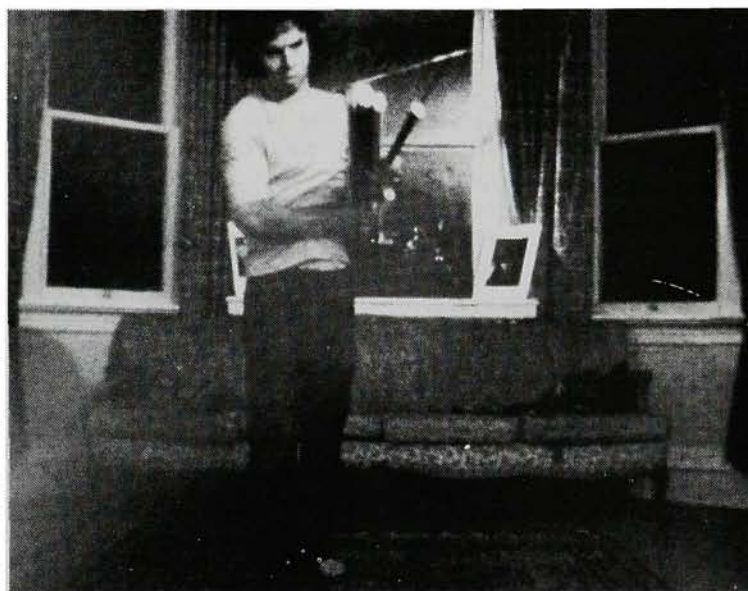
Rob Wallace's **Thursday Auction** won both the first and second prizes for documentary films. The fifteen minute study of the Kitchener, Ontario stockyard shows the farmers, the animals and the auctioneer during the course of a day. The subjects are fascinating in the way that farmers and animals always are to city dwellers and, of course, the auctioneer's chant is effective because of its sound. The film focuses on these interesting, but nevertheless somewhat predictable, characters at the auction and comes off as a very professional documentary. It is successful as a record of a disappearing aspect of Canadian life, but I found it lacking as a film. I sensed that the filmmaker's goal was to achieve a National Film Board style of documentary and, I regret, level of dullness. This is a good N.F.B. film with the exception of the final sequence showing frantic pigs running through a maze-like series of pens to the accompaniment of country music. This final sequence redeems the film for me, and it hints that Rob Wallace may become more than just another professional documentary filmmaker.

Two documentaries from Ryerson Polytechnical Institute and another from Simon Fraser University have sequences which indicate to me that each of them could have been made into significantly better documentaries of approximately half their present length. Robert Freimuts' **Ice Cream** is about the machines used to make ice cream. Close-ups of the automated production line are rhythmically edited to a jazz score. The result is a unique way of looking at machines; The movements of the machines become funny. But it continues too long and eventually becomes repetitious. The second Ryerson film is **Bleecker St.** by Ross Redfern. This is one of the few political films shown in the festival, and it makes a strong case against the eviction of tenants by unscrupulous landlords. There are powerful sequences showing demonstrations against the evictions and interviews with the landlord's unctuous representative. These excellent documentary sequences were weakened to a considerable extent by placing them in a framework consisting of a badly read commentary and excessive dwelling on still photographs.

S. Michael Checknik's **Sammy Sammy** from Simon Fraser has a similar problem: Sammy is an eccentric, hard drinking, backwoods character who makes a fine subject for a documentary. The film captures Sammy's spirit in a drunken session playing the accordion and in a beautiful sawmill sequence, but it also shows a number of extremely ordinary scenes such as an overly long one of him shaving. Perhaps it is discouraging to admit that a man as colourful as Sam-

my can only provide material for an intense film of ten minutes instead of twenty, but filmmakers have to learn that there is a great difference in what is interesting in the world and what sustains interest when put on film. The general issue raised by my comments about these three non-winning documentaries is whether intensity should be valued over completeness in a documentary. I choose intensity; these filmmakers choose completeness.

Lorne Marin's **Second Impressions** is the second prize film in the Experimental category. This 9 minute colour film shows a view of a room from a single camera position. First a black and white film is seen on a small screen located in the room; this film stops; the screen is taken down and carried back to behind where the camera is located. Next a black and white film is seen through the windows of the room. This is followed by the central part of the film which involves people entering the room, sitting on a couch and then leaving. Many of these people are seen in double exposure. Finally as the end approaches there is a sequence of 3 quick, repeated shots of the person who had taken the screen down (Lorne Marin) walking toward the camera.



**Second Impressions** by Lorne Marin from Concordia University.

What does **Second Impressions** mean? I don't know from watching the film, but one of the most interesting things about the film is that it creates a mood in which these hazy, ethereal images seem appropriate. The soft classical music helps to achieve this, but it is the film itself which communicates that the audience should not expect some single narrative event to occur. The film doesn't make any attempt at being a narrative or documentary film, so the audience never begins a futile attempt to discover a plot or a single meaning. Also the title hints at how the film should be viewed: These are "second impressions" of a room, films already made, and people. These are visual "impressions", hence Impressionism in painting comes to mind and aids in understanding these nebulous, coloured images. Finally the time of the film and the mood seem dreamlike with the images appearing, disappearing and overlapping in ways which are only possible in dreams or films. Actually I do not think that an explanation of the film can be discovered by watching it. Lorne Marin may know what the film means, but my point is that the film succeeds admirably in creating an atmosphere which does not depend on interpreting the images, and this is quite an achievement.

The second prize for a Scenario was awarded to two films: Glen Saltzman's **Her Decision** and Ken Ilass' **Temporarily Confused**. **Her Decision** is a 17 minute film made in the style of a film from the silent period. It is in black and white, uses titles between shots for the dialogue and has only



a piano accompaniment for sound. Also the story is a rather sentimental love story which would be appropriate for the silent period.

I found **Her Decision** delightful. There are amusing references to other films which I would expect students with a university education in film to make in a film such as this and which I would expect their peers to understand. For example, one of the titles is "Children of the fields"; this, I suspect, is a direct quote from D.W. Griffith. And later in the film when the boy slaps the girl, the slap is shown three times. I understand this to be a reference to the kind of shots of repeated action used in 1928 by Sergei Eisenstein in **October**. Similarly I understand a lyrical slow motion running sequence as a reference to René Clair's 1924 **Entr'acte**. At least one shot is used which jarred with the silent style of the film. The couple is shown walking along a country road, and instead of moving the camera with them to keep their size relative to the frame constant, the camera is placed some distance in front of them and zooms back as they move closer to it. Although this zoom shot did jar with the period style, I think the anachronism makes the film more interesting. It serves to remind the viewer to think carefully about what is and isn't part of a silent film style.

**Her Decision** is one of the few films in which physically beautiful people play the lead parts. Students often seem to cast the first available friend in the leading roles, but the couple in this film look as if they were chosen to some extent because their appearance was appropriate to the stereotyped images of the leads in a love story. Actually instead of being a sentimental love story, I assume the film is intended to be a parody of a romantic silent film. Surprisingly there are moments in the film when it can be appreciated as an authentic silent film might be. These moments are fleeting, and laughter is the more pervasive reaction. Credit is due to the camerawoman, Rebecca Yates, for beautiful photography. (And I strongly recommend that the Festival avoid using "Cameraman" as the Credit designation on next year's entry form.) The music is credited to Charles Hofmann, and I would like to ask Glen Salzman if this is Charles Hofmann who was New York's Museum of Modern Art's pianist for silent films. If he is, then having him do the music is like having James Wong Howe photograph a student film. Mr. Hofmann is the leading professional musician for silent films in North America.

**Temporarily Confused** opens with a fine shot which begins with a close-up of an elaborate clock and moves over a night table until it rests on a little girl in bed. Then the shot is overexposed to leave a blank screen; this is followed by shots of the girl preparing for school. When she finishes, she goes downstairs, and at the bottom of the stairs, there is a perfect mirror shot of her. She is seen in the mirror, but only after the camera moved did I understand that I was seeing a mirror image of the girl. This image is only the beginning for mirror images are the central device of the film.

The little girl is regularly seen meeting herself in seemingly impossible ways. She sees herself as a living mannequin in a store window and inside of a cage with monkeys. This is disconcerting on two levels: On the level of content these double images seem planned to recreate a nightmare, and nightmares are disturbing even when they are someone else's. On the level of the appearance of the film, some of these images cannot be explained by trick shots or the use of mirrors. Actually the mystery has a simple solution. There are twin girls, and I expect the film was planned around the availability of the actresses. Even so, I found that the film continued to be disconcerting and to surprise after I knew that there were twin actresses. I take this as an indication that the film was successful because the content of images kept making me forget momentarily the method that had been used to get the double images. The film ends with a shot of the girl sitting up quickly in bed with a look of terror on her

face, meaning of course that the eight minute film had been a dream from the point of the first shot overexposing to white until the final shot. This dream framework is a trite narrative device, but Ken Hlass managed to produce an interesting film in spite of it.

Barry Greenwald's **Metamorphosis** is one of the three honourable mention films entered in the scenario category. The story of this ten minute film is surprising, and this unexpectedness accounts for part of the film's strength: A mousy looking man is shown transforming himself and eventually dying by mastering one part of his existence. Each day the man rides an elevator down from his high-rise apartment on his way to a routine, dull job. Very gradually he begins to master the space of the elevator car for the time of his daily ride. First he dares to undress in the elevator; then he becomes bolder and does more and more unexpected things during the daily trip. He delays starting to undress until he can do it in the last three floors of the trip, brings a chair, reads and even sets up a stove for cooking. The small part of his life spent in an elevator changes him into a happy, confident person, but the pace is too much: it kills him.

The film can be understood as a metaphor for many less extreme situations in the world, so it is quite serious and relevant. However, the initial reaction to the film is laughter. Barry Greenwald really understands comedy, and he keeps adding gags to each elevator ride to make the trips progressively more hilarious. Several times I thought that this trip must be the last one because the film could not get more humorous, but it did. Films which are both funny and serious are difficult to make, and Greenwald has made a real winner.

The two other honourable mention scenario films are also attempts at humour. Claude Laflamme's **Les Aventures de running shoes** is the more successful of the two. It concerns the frustrated attempt of a young man to take a book, **La Vérité sur le sexe** of course, from a library shelf. The book seems firmly wedged in the shelf and cannot be removed. He tries tools, but nothing works. Yet another man walks up and just casually takes the book from the shelf with no difficulty. When this man returns the book, it immediately becomes an immovable object again for our young man. The frustrated reader produces a bomb and destroys the entire library, leaving only the shelf with the still immovable book and himself. The film is made with accelerated motion and is one of the funniest films from the Festival. The final sequence was particularly well done: The library is blown up, and the next shot shows the young man at the bottom of a huge crater with only the library shelf and a door remaining. It is a good image.

**The Bet** is Antonio Rizi's three minute honourable mention film. It is a story of two boys who bet another boy that he will not steal a tape recorder from a parked car. The boy accepts the bet and wins by taking the recorder. Then a police car appears and the two boys run away leaving the thief holding the recorder. The thief now returns the recorder to its owner who is driving away, and the owner rewards the thief because she believes two fleeing boys are the thieves. It is a simple film with a punch line that provides a chuckle. The modest length of the film makes it acceptable that all its interest is at the end.

Two films which evidently did not impress the jury at all were among my personal choices for the most interesting films in the Festival. One of these **Aura-Gone**, is a ten minute experimental film by Neal Livingston from York University. The other is a 12 minute documentary, **Cream Soda**, by Holly Dale from Sheridan College. Both of these films impress me as not being student films. By saying this, I intend to point out that saying a film is a student film has the sound of an apology, as if a student film is not to be judged as rigorously as a non-student film. I consider both



films, as well as several other films in the Festival, to be films which do not need to be qualified as student films.

**Aura-Gone** was one of two films which evoked the strongest audience reaction, and I understand the audience's antipathy toward the film which can seem static until you start to look closely at what is happening. Actually the audience's reaction is not surprising; experimental films have a long history of disturbing audiences. René Clair's **Entr'acte** did it in 1924 and Michael Snow's films do it now. Don't misunderstand me: **Aura-Gone** is not in any sense the equal of **Entr'acte**, but it is a serious, mature experimental film.



**Aura-Gone** by Neal Livingston from York University.

Livingston's film begins with synthesizer manipulated words and phrases being repeated as images made from a car moving through a city are seen. The car stops in front of the Mount Sinai Hospital and the central portion of the film consists of a single shot of the front of the hospital taken from inside the car. When the film is first seen there is initially tension as you wait for something to happen. After a minute or two you realize that perhaps what you see happening is all that is going to happen. At this point you either find things in the image that are worth looking at or you turn off to the film. I discovered that this image has a particularly fascinating complexity. The front of the hospital has the appearance of a giant mirror with double doors set into it; these doors are automated so that they open as people approach them. The doors sometimes seem like mirrors and at other times seem to be ordinary glass with reflections. Also, inside these outer doors there is a second pair of identical automated doors opening and closing with a slightly different rhythm from the outer doors. For me the experience of seeing the film consists of watching the real front of the hospital, then watching the mirror image of the car containing the camera and the space behind the car, then watching the images reflected on the surfaces of the irregularly opening and closing layers of doors which also reveal the space inside the hospital. The effect of watching this extended single shot, which initially seemed so static, is to gradually discover the layers of real and reflected space occupied by moving people. It is a fine choice of a central image for the film; it is an image which initially seems extremely simple but which reveals itself to be complex. The shot ends when a woman comes out of the hospital and approaches the camera; she walks up to the camera and leans inside the car to greet someone. The consequence of this is that the fixed camera position is given a narrative explanation. The camera represents the perfectly ordinary stare of a person waiting for someone to come out of the hospital.

Holly Dale's **Cream Soda** is a film about Toronto prostitutes made inside a body rub parlour. Much of it seems to

have been made using a hidden camera and microphone because the film is often dimly lit with the coloured lights used in the parlour and the sound is sometimes unclear. This roughness of finish adds to my sense that this is not staged. Another factor which contributes to the unstaged look are very relaxed shots of women dressing as they prepare for the day's work. These are amazingly unselfconscious shots, and I suspect that the fact that the film's crew was composed of women was essential in making them possible.

The film is outstanding for several reasons: First prostitution is a taboo area of our culture in which both men and women seem to be interested, but the area has not been documented on film. I do not know of another film dealing openly with individual prostitutes at work. The second reason this film stands apart from the other films in the Festival is that it is the only film which has immediate commercial potential. It would be a perfect short to show with the French film **The Exhibition** by Jean-François Davy which should open here with a great controversy about censorship in a few months. The Davy film is a documentary about an actress in pornographic films. I also think **Cream Soda** would be an excellent film for discussion in Woman's Studies classes and consciousness raising groups: It shows prostitutes as women doing a job rather than as criminals. Women now have conflicting attitudes about whether prostitutes are admirable or just victims, and this film would clearly be a good starting point for a discussion.

## Prizes

I have not mentioned the winner of the \$1000 Norman McLaren Award for the overall winning film because this prize was not given. The jury decided that no film merited this award, and I concur with the jury on their decision. There was no single film of really exceptional quality; there was no single film which clearly deserved to be acknowledged as the best Canadian student film. My understanding is that next year's Norman McLaren Award will be valued at \$2000.

While reading the discussion of the winning films, you may have noticed the unpredictability of prizes actually awarded: In Animation there was a first prize, but no second prize, in Documentary a single film won both first and second prizes; in Experimental there was a second prize, but no first prize; in Scenario second prize was won by two films. Thus in no prize category was first prize awarded to one film and second prize to another film as would have been expected. The prizes in each of the four categories were rearranged by the jury.

On the night the prize winners were announced, the students in the audience were outraged. Instead of awarding prizes that would have been predicted from the Programme, the modified prize list and 5 Honourable Mentions were announced. It was confusing, and I think ill advised on the part of the jury. Note that I am not saying that it was against the rules of the Festival or that there was any possibility of irregular manipulation of the financial awards. But I am saying that every effort should have been made to award the announced first and second prizes in the four categories. It is clear to me that when distinct first and second prizes were not awarded in any category, every effort was not made. A perfectly fair alternative to awarding distinct first and second prizes in each category would be to announce that this year's procedure would occur again next year. If this were done, students would know what to expect and perhaps would not be as angry as they are now. The announcement which would clearly state what was in fact this year's policy is as follows: "The jury may decide to award some prizes." If this is not announced as the policy for next year, I would hope that it would be emphasized to the jury that they should make an effort to award the announced first and second prizes. I suspect that this was not done this year.



## Student Films

What's wrong with student films? I am aware that this question can only be answered with generalizations, but I feel obligated to make these generalizations with the hope that next year's films just might be improved. Also I make them because I take student filmmakers seriously: They are the future of Canadian film.

Excessive length is a pervasive difficulty with student films. I think that every film in the Festival over ten minutes long would have been better if it had been cut by one third. This is a strong statement, but excessive length is a constant problem. Students seem unable to discard footage. I realize that each foot of film represents thought, effort and money, but students seem to regularly lose sight of their goal. The goal should be to make the best film possible, not to organize all the acceptable footage into a film.

The myth that there is a correlation between using lip sync sound and quality is one which needs to be destroyed. The statistics are clear: of the eight live action films receiving awards, only one was made with lip sync sound equipment. The statistics from last year are similar, but I am not just discussing statistics or winning a Festival award. Student lip sync films often are afflicted with poorly written and delivered dialogue or with dull documentary footage. Why does this happen so often?

Students making scenario films with lip sync sound burden themselves with the problems of writing the dialogue as well as with the almost insolveable problem of finding people who can say the lines. Finding film actors and actresses is one of the major problems of English Canadian film, and I would like to think that students will eventually find the people to solve the problem. However, I have seen little reason to think that students can develop these actors and actresses for their first films. Students making lip sync documentaries face the normal risk of this kind of filmmaking: they may or may not find interesting subjects and their search may require shooting a lot of film. Professional documentary filmmakers budget for this; students can seldom afford the costs of the stock and often end up using lip sync footage which lacks the spark which can be found by a filmmaker searching through rushes from a 20 to 1 shooting ratio.

On the basis of looking at films with and without lip sync sound, I conclude that silent shooting allows students to use their imagination and to think exclusively in terms of images and editing. Lip sync shooting introduces an entire new series of aesthetic elements and seems to overwhelm many student filmmakers. Although I am arguing that students should free themselves from the myth of lip sync sound, I think that it is essential for students to make lip sync films. This is a contradiction, but there is an explanation: I think that students can make better films if they shoot silent. But I also think that students need to be educated in the technique of making lip sync films. A student who wants to work as a filmmaker must have experience with professional lip sync equipment. My suggestion is that students be conscious of the purpose of the films they make: They should make their winner with silent shooting, and they should make their lip sync film with consciousness that it is likely to be educational, but a loser. Students: Prove me wrong next year at the Festival!

The final problem with student films is the most serious one. The goal of many of these filmmakers appears to be to make a film without style; their ideal would be to make a film in which no cuts are noticeable, in which all camera movements are perfectly smooth, in which the soundtrack is absolutely clear. In short their nirvana would be to achieve a National Film Board level of professionalism. I wish their goal was much higher: art, style, the best film anyone ever made, craziness. I would prefer seeing brilliant failures to seeing pedestrian, competent tripe. □

## Thoughts After the Festival

by Neal Livingston, director of *Aura-Gone*

Film schools need to be a training ground for all types of cinema. However, what we saw at the festival was an exposé of the way most schools are trying through direct and indirect methods to mould young students into existing styles of filmmaking. In my opinion, students should be shown the possibilities of the medium, then left to work, discover, and develop into filmmakers. It was obvious that few schools are aware or open enough to be real educators instead of trainers. It was also obvious to the audience at large that the lack of interesting and stimulating work was not due just to the students and schools, but to the organization of the festival itself. A pre-selection committee screens the films and limits the material available for viewing by both audience and judges. The organizers of the festival in their statements on awards night seemed to have strong ideas of what should be produced by students. Lorne Marin, upon telling a Famous Players representative he wasn't interested in commercial cinema, was informed that he would receive a letter with his award cheque to help "straighten out his thoughts."

This brings up the matter of product itself. What films submitted should be seen, or win awards? One of my impressions is that the organizers and judges would have liked a highly polished 35mm colour short, slick and with some creative thought and potential, as the grand prize winner. This is basically the formula that a large Canadian film distributor gave out to a hall full of film students at York University a year and a half ago: nice films for an established mass audience for young filmmakers to fit into.

The judges thoughts seemed directed in the above manner instead of toward the students' work itself.

I am not against commercial cinema as such, but why must it be the predominant attitude at a student festival? The funding support that Famous Players gives to the festival appears primarily to be for young Canadian cinema to be shown in competition. It also seems directed to their future needs for more Canadian products. Witness the speech of their representative on awards night, and his enticement of \$2,000 for student filmmakers to work towards for next year.

Within the student community there is a large and growing number of serious working artists who do not see their products as a means of stuffing mounds of money into their pockets. It is my belief that from these people a Canadian Cinema can develop against formidable odds. Not to be overlooked is that they will need serious funding in the near future to fully develop as filmmakers. Private investors should not be turned away through lack of exposure and information as to where film may really be going in this country.

As a participant this year and a possible future participant, it's hard to know where to turn with the problems surrounding the festival. Following the disgust of awards night, there was discussion of a future boycott, and of the possibility of an alternate festival. I hope the mounting calls of protest over the last two years help institute some changes, and that the sham of this year's festival is not repeated.