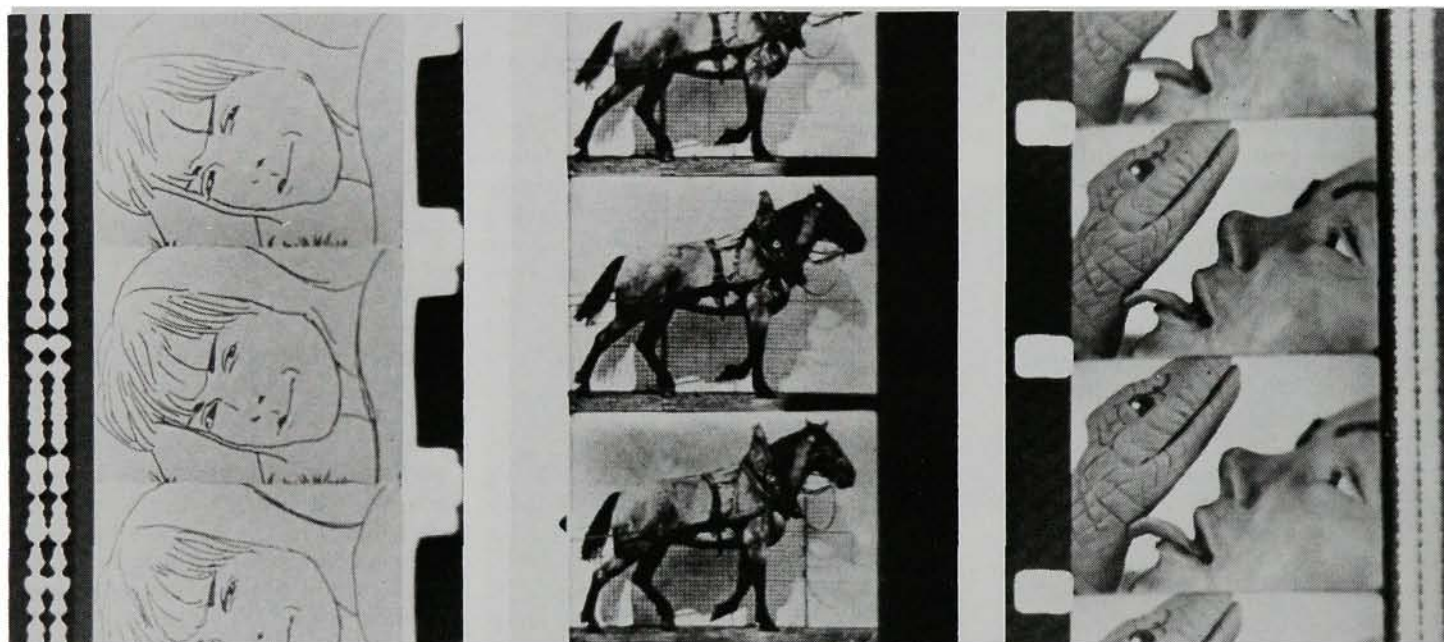


john straiton

for the love of it

by Barry and Greg Thomson



Horseplay

Animals in Motion

Eurynome

You have been labeled an amateur filmmaker. Professionals can be amateurs, in that they maintain an idealism, a love for making films.

An amateur is one who loves what he does. The reason I am into animation is because I happen to be able to do a lot of things in that area – not easily, but I can do things that not many individuals can do all as one person. Some people can write, others can draw, others can think editorially, while some people are technical. I can do all these as one person; that solves communication problems and eliminates a lot of psychological problems that working with other people might involve. I don't have to earn my living in film.

*Let's talk about your intentions. In **The Portrait of Lydia** there are recurring motifs and images which apply to other of your films – women, snake, horse.*

Portrait of Lydia was my first and – as far as I knew at the time – last film. So I just poured all kinds of images that I had scraped together into the one film. Then I started making other films and each one has one or more aspects from **Portrait of Lydia**. But **Portrait of Lydia** contained a lot of my inner feelings, ideas, images.

Barry and Greg Thomson, freelance writers from Toronto, are both graduates of York University where they worked, respectively as Associate Editor and Book Editor, on Pulse Magazine.

*Let's discuss the image sequence in **The Portrait of Lydia**. Images appear to follow a pattern; for example, there is a Bible, a courtroom, a woman, a skull, then a tombstone and so on.*

I planned the film so that it goes in cycles because the music went in cycles. That is the reason for the repetition. Toward the end of the film I gave up the cycles because I got bored drawing the same things over and over. Up till then I stuck to my plan.

The basic idea of the film was about a girl who lived in a middle-sized Ontario town who was breaking free from her inhibitions. All my theories about religion and life are in the film. For example, religion is the super-ego which is ingrained by parents and the church. Lydia breaks free in her nakedness and someone touches her. Bang! All of a sudden the father appears, then the church and so forth. Her death is the ultimate punishment, probably.

Basically, the film represents the girl's thoughts about love, sex, marriage.

Could you explain why Freud and Jung and mythology in general are catalysts to your animation ideas?

Well, when I made **Portrait of Lydia** I was in fact carrying out a hunch I'd had years ago. I had been wondering whether there was some connection between art appreciation and dream symbolism. If in dreams a tree or shrubbery has a

Filmography

JOHN STRAITON

The Portrait of Lydia: 1963-64. Animator, John Straiton; music, Franz Schubert, Eighth Symphony; 16 mm, color, 8 min. *The film deals with the myth of art history. All the images are famous Western paintings. "Basically the film represents the girl's thoughts about love, sex and marriage."* (J.S.)

Steam Ballet: 1966-67. Photography and editing by John Straiton; music, Glen Willer, In The Mood; 16 mm, color, 4 min. *A montage of moving images of machinery – cogs, wheels and camshafts – seem made to move to the Miller mood.*

The Banshees: 1966-67. Photography, sculpture and animation by John Straiton; music, Igor Stravinsky, Firebird; 16 mm, color, 8:05 min. *Fairytales-like images of fire and night and shapes that seem to come alive.*

Animals in Motion: 1968. Animator, John Straiton; photographed by Edward Muybridge from 1877-85; 16 mm, sepia, 7 min. Music, show music from 1880-90 period. *Witty montage of Muybridge's serious studies is a spirited romp through his collected photographs.*

Eurynome: 1969-70. Animation and sculpture by John Straiton; 16 mm, color, 6:30 min. Music, Gustav Mahler, Seventh Symphony. *Sensual as plasticine can be, a lot of myths are mixed in a strangely heavy allegory of a woman, a snake and some consequences.*

Horseplay: 1972-73. Animator, John Straiton; producer, Mrs. Louise Clinton; music composed and synchronized by Bill Cordray; 16 mm, color, 6:38 min. *Sparsely limned, this treatment of a clever anecdote of a woman and a centaur on a sunny afternoon is as frisky as the tale (pun intended) with a delightful twist... at the end, of course.*

Les portes de l'enfer (The Gates of Hell): Animated film in progress. *Based on Rodin's sculpture.*

particular meaning I wondered whether that kind of thing made certain images attractive because they played on those symbols in the mind. I did a painting one time based on a famous reclining nude by George Wan. Then I took the various parts of the body and superimposed little miniature paintings over them. A breast became a nicely rounded hill in a landscape, for instance.

I've always felt that there was a certain amount of truth in the things Freud was groping for. It's a very inexact science and I put it to the test by making the film. Most people are quite unaware that I've done that and that's fine. People look at it and like it or dislike it for their own reasons. One woman may see a horse as a male symbol and another way see it as a symbol of aggression and another may see it as a father image. But it's hard to deny that horses are attractive to look at, for one reason or another.

I got interested in Jung only recently. He goes way further than Freud, of course, and I think he gets a little on the silly side. But he tracks down mythology to the idea that there are basic human characteristics shown in myths. Mythologies of different countries often run quite parallel to one another. The Canadian Indians and the Japanese; the South American Indians and the Europeans have many things in common with one another in their early stories and myths. I try to go back to those things so I'll have a reasonably good chance of making a film that will appeal broadly and have a long, long life rather than being something that is merely a comment on the passing moment.

Mythology, of course, is a good subject matter for animation because so much of it involves transformations and monsters and so on.

Your first development of a myth as a whole would be the one with the serpent – Eurynome.

Well, consciously using myth. The myth of Eurynome was my excuse to put on the screen what I really wanted there.

I did make a short film on Marilyn Monroe before I started being a little more serious. You can shoot a film in an evening if you work at it hard and I did one on Marilyn Monroe one evening on my vacation.

A film on Marilyn Monroe – that's mythology! Later I thought that since there is so much material available on Marilyn Monroe that I'd do a larger work. I thought I should start with Athena and work through various goddesses to Clara Bow. One continuous dissolve through Betty Boop and so on till we end with Marilyn Monroe.

Incidentally in **Eurynome**, each time I made any kind of movement with the plasticine figure I destroyed the piece of sculpture. I had to have something to refer to. The woman's face is that of Marilyn Monroe. It's not really recognizable as such but that's the image I used.

Did you research Greek myth in any detail?

I did a lot of reading in that area. Let me tell you how the film came about. I started out to do a film called **Three Loves**, based on paintings I had seen of Zeus who seduced people in various forms; as a shower of gold, as a swan, as a bull, as a serpent and various other things. I decided that since the serpent-and-woman relationship was always kind of a shocker I'd put that and **Europa and the Bull** and **Leda and the Swan** together in one film. I intended to make a mythological trilogy. I shot **Leda and the Swan**, but the figures were so tiny and the animation so bad that it didn't work. Also, the action between Leda and the Swan was so bestial that I've only shown it to one or two people. I was so discouraged I abandoned the whole project.

But, during the next six months to a year I learned a lot of things. I learned not to make little plasticine figures. I made the basic female plasticine figure a foot high instead of a few inches and started again.

In order to do those three stories I used Robert Graves' book on mythology. He has many interesting insights. He's much like Fraser and others who are into psychological and



John Straiton

sociological study of mythic content. The first myth in Graves' book is about the serpent and the woman. In the recounting of this myth she rose from the sea and I just couldn't make the sea out of plasticine. The rocks in **Eurynome** I got from another myth which explained the creation of man by giants throwing rocks at one another and the rocks turning into people. There are all kinds of bits and pieces from mythology that I compressed into the one film.

Why did you use a real clip of a hydrogen bomb explosion in Eurynome?

I couldn't make a plasticine explosion. I don't like the explosion very much, but I needed something to wipe out the sexual arousal and I thought that was pretty strong.

Why did you choose Mahler's music for Eurynome?

A friend of mine suggested it when I asked, "What would be a good piece of music?" and that was it. The rest of the film's soundtrack was made by a woman who worked for the (advertising) agency who liked to experiment with sound. It's quite an incredible job. There are seven or eight layers of sound on the track. I owe her a debt of gratitude since the film wouldn't be as good without the sound affects.

On the program of your films recently exhibited at the Ontario Science Centre by the Ontario Film Theatre there is a note written on Steam Ballet about machines being sensual. Do you find this to be so?

For some reason nobody accepted **Steam Ballet**. I noticed that whenever one of my films had a sexy quality to it people accepted it. So I thought: "What the hell, I'll write something about this film that's sexy." There are people who are amused by the movement of the machine parts. They have a humorous look. Like an eccentric dancer. That's what delighted me.

How did you come to do Steam Ballet?

It happened over a period of three or four years. One year I went to a steam engine fair and thought about doing the film. The next year I shot it in 8 mm. It looked good so I did it the following year in 16 mm.

The 8 mm version is almost identical to the 16 mm film except that a few of the more entertaining movements I couldn't find the next time around. I am not telling a story or creating an essay. More than anything else I am making interesting visuals – pretty to look at and enjoy. I didn't have any other thought in mind but what I called the film – **Steam Ballet** – and that's literally what it is. It's a dance.

I made **Steam Ballet** to go with a train song by Miller – Chattanooga Choo Choo. It had a good rhythm, but was too short. So I ran the footage I shot with different pieces of music and In the Mood worked well.

Steam Ballet was never very popular in amateur circles. It was an easy film to make and I did it quickly.

The Banshees, like Eurynome, has a destructive element: the fire.

I used to do wood carving. I'd take a root and make part of a figure out of it. I did these wood carvings years ago when I was in my 20s. On my vacation I'd find driftwood on the shore and carve a face on it.

With **The Banshees** I wanted to make a film about witches and darkness and the forest and wooden objects. At first I had in mind a film using natural roots and other shapes. Later I thought, "I've got all this sculpture. I'll slip that in too." I used the lighting to bring these things to life, to make a dance of the witches. I imagined a dark, red hole in the ground glowing upward with these creatures performing a witches' sabbath.

I was influenced by Dorothy in the **Wizard of Oz** film, the trees grabbing her and so on.



Eurynome. "She rose out of chaos and coupled with the Serpent to make the Universal Egg"

Would you explain how you came to do Animals in Motion?

Edward Muybridge published 100,000 photos or more in the late 1800s. The book I have, which contains the film's title, is 75 years old. I shot some of the film from this book, but I found I was destroying it with the animation device. So I got two collections that have been reprinted in modern times and filmed them.

The books have sequences with 12 to 20 photos to each movement study. Some of them are quite random. For example, the woman smoking was obviously taken with vertical cameras because the perspective change is from up to down at a rate of six frames a second, I would guess. I made **Animals in Motion** by leafing through these picture books and picking out amusing juxtapositions. It didn't work as well as I had hoped. The woman climbs the ladder and then the monkey climbs a stick. The monkey travels along upside down and the woman does the same. It isn't until the plump woman walks by and then the elephant walks by that the joke finally connects.

There is another one people miss. A woman is sweeping and a horse goes by, then a dog goes by and she continues sweeping. When an elephant goes by she puts the broom down. That was the Chaplin gag I was trying to use and it didn't work.

Was Animals in Motion shot in monochrome?

I shot it black and white negative and when I saw it it looked dull so I had it printed on color stock using a filter, to give an antique photographic look.

With Animals in Motion you used a technique that became synonymous with Expo 67 films: multiple screen images.

I decided to use multiple images just to show that I could do it.

What was the little piece at the end of Animals in Motion?

It looks like some guy putting on his pants.

That was me.

It happened so quickly.

That's an inside joke. Muybridge had photographed himself so I did the same.

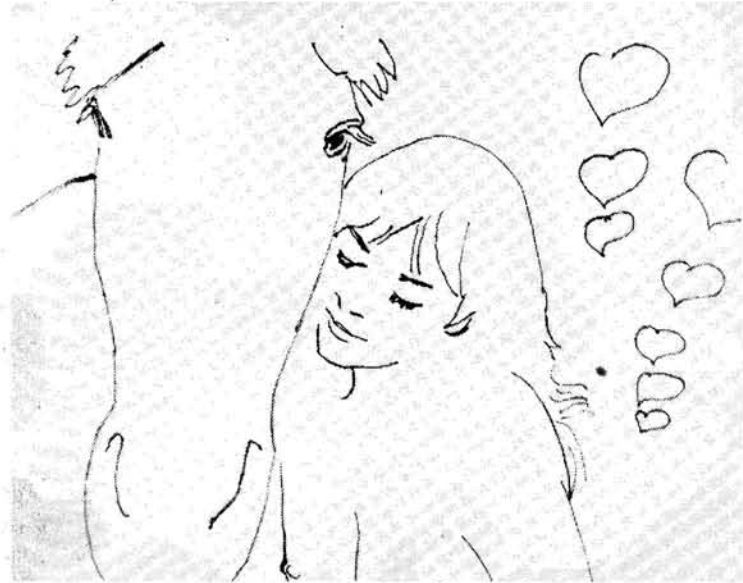
In several of your films you appear to emphasize the action by pointing it up rather than allowing the action to speak for itself. For example, in Horseplay when the woman

kisses the horse you use a cliché, having hearts burst forth, but the source of the hearts is between her legs rather than between her lips.

Both, by the way. These clichés are what they used to do in most animation but I decided to do what I did just for fun. That's playing. It's similar to Felix the Cat. When he was surprised there would be an exclamation point over his head.

*How did you choose the subject for **Horseplay**? What were the things that mainly interested you in making this film?*

That's an interesting story. There was a girl who worked at the agency who was interested in film. She said if I was making a film sometime she'd like to be involved in it somehow. She had a horse and a rather good-looking husband.



Elementary animation forms a play about a horse in **Horseplay**

With those ingredients the idea of **Horseplay** developed. I made a very tight storyboard. Then I shot the film live. Needless to say she wore a bathing suit, which I removed during the animation.

The subject was mythology. I try to choose for animation something that can't be done in some other way. What interested me was using live action as a basis for the animation. You'll notice in the film hand-held camera movement and things of that sort, which are usually not done in animation. While I was making it one of the things that was interesting to me was seeing how little drawing I could do in order to suggest an action. I had a lot of fun doing that. There are places where I used only a few lines to show the horse and the rider, getting very free or loose in my drawing style.

*Were there particular technical problems you had to solve in producing **Horseplay**?*

It seems like such a simple thing to take a figure from a piece of film, rear-project it and trace it and then do animation from that; but of course it doesn't work at all like that. You have to learn to match line for line. I had to throw away several months of work in experimenting to find out what I was doing wrong. I assumed that by adding frames up that the mind would average it out, but in fact it doesn't happen that way. The eye sees every individual frame quite clearly. For instance, when I was drawing the man's head I squiggled his hair roughly and I didn't bother to make it continuous from frame to frame. Then when I projected it, it looked as if he had a cloud dancing on top

of his head. I solved that by taking all the drawings and filling it in with solid red. There really weren't many technical problems. It was simply learning animation and as I got going and got to understand what was happening I could draw much more loosely.

How do you usually plan your films?

I do it various ways. Sometimes I write extensively first and sometimes I start off by drawing or sketching. With different films I use different methods.

You so often work with different techniques in your films – drawings, roots, plasticine, photographs. Why?

When you've done a plasticine animation film you're sick of plasticine for a while! However, I like doing plasticine animation because the result is so much more lifelike. Plasticine, more than anything else, I have found, brings the objects to life.

I don't think I will return to animating live subjects (as in **Horseplay**) ever again.

Now, I am returning to **Portrait of Lydia** techniques with my new film because I have an appropriate subject to do them with.

Do you usually title your work before you start?

My working title for my current project is **Les portes de l'enfer**, which is taken from The Gates of Hell, Rodin's sculpture. Rodin had all his important works contained in that one piece of sculpture.

I intend to explore all kinds of new themes, since as I told you I've been reading further and getting new thoughts. I've also got a lot of old ideas that I haven't used yet.

I started reading Jung in some depth for this next film I am making. I don't find him as interesting as I find Freud, who is much easier to understand.

How would you describe your visual aesthetic?

If you mean what do I like, I guess I would say I like concrete rather than abstract. When I paint I like to paint real things, real scenes. My taste is average. I am not a fan of Pollock or Warhol or Snow. In art I suppose I like the impressionist period the best. Things where people know that they're seeing art and not just some invention.

Photography is magic and filmmaking is more than magic. Where I first felt that was when I first did animation with plasticine. Literally, I felt I had created a being. Here's this little piece of plasticine and it moves its hand and looks at you. That's magic and I was thrilled with this. Magic and mythology coincide with one another. Bergman as a child was interested in magic; Orson Welles is interested in magic and Lumiere was a magician to begin with. This kind of person often gets into filmmaking.

What do you expect the audience to bring to your films?

Well, interest in the human mind, a sense of humor, a little literacy. Most of my films were made for my friends. So, I have an idea of the people I am addressing or making the film for. I expect them to know a little bit about or have some feeling for psychology and history. I expect them to want to be entertained. I always hope that my films are entertaining in their own way. I don't try to persuade anybody or change their minds about anything in particular.

What is the situation with distribution of your films?

They are handled basically by the filmmakers' co-operative (Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre) here in Toronto. There's an outfit in California distributing some of my films. I understand they owe me money and I have yet to see it. I find the whole film world to be loose and strange about money and payments. I am glad I am not trying to make a living on film work. □

Marv Newland

creator of the famous
"Bambi meets Godzilla"
announces his new
production of



Sing Beast Sing

a spectacular 5 minute
musical comedy

For Specialty Films Inc. release.

INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES
NOW OPEN

Write for details, to Marv Newland, president

**INTERNATIONAL
ROCKETSHIP
LIMITED**



ANIMATED FILMS

1227 RICHARDS STREET, VANCOUVER, B. C. V6B 3G1 CANADA 604/681 2716

YOU NEED THIS NOW



Controlled and edited by
PHIL AUGUSTE etc



FILMCRAFT

Productions & Publications
116 Earton Road
Aurora, Ontario
M1T 2R6

\$6 (including postage)

—NEW—

We offer:-

**WORLD'S LATEST CATALOGUE.

**A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER.

**MAIL AND PHONE SERVICE.

**THE MOST COMPLETE COLLECTION OF IN-PRINT BOOKS ON CINEMA IN THE WORLD.

**WE OFFER OUTSTANDING LOW PRICED SELECTIONS IN EACH NEWSLETTER.

**10% DISCOUNT TO INSTITUTIONS.

**Remember:-

WE NO LONGER CARRY HOME MOVIES OR SOUNDTRACKS.

—NOW—

Cine Books

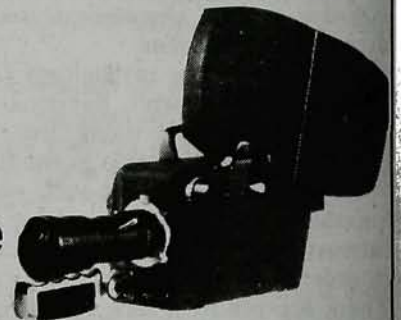
Catalogue \$3.50

**692a
Yonge St.
Toronto,
Ont. m4y2a6
964-6 474**

**570
Granville St.
Vancouver,
B.C. v6c 1w6
681-0329**

There are over 200 CP16R's in the News

Here are some of the reasons...



- Lightweight • No cables • On shoulder shooting, no tripod necessary • Rugged and reliable in any climate
- Extremely mobile • Light Nicad batteries give between 3,000 and 4,000 ft. per single charge • Full reflex • Quiet operating, a really silent partner • Camera, amplifier & battery, all in one.

Cinema Products, CP16R, a complete camera system.



Alex L. CLARK CO. LTD.

Toronto • Montreal • Calgary
Toronto — Telephone (416) 255-8594
30 Dorchester Ave.

35 years of creative animation

The National Film Board of Canada
proudly announces its participation in
the International Animated Film Festival, Ottawa '76

National Arts Centre, August 10 to 15

Retrospective of NFBC animated films:
Tuesday, August 10, 3 to 5 p.m.

Exhibition on the history of animation: throughout Festival
in the lobby of the Arts Centre

Films in competition

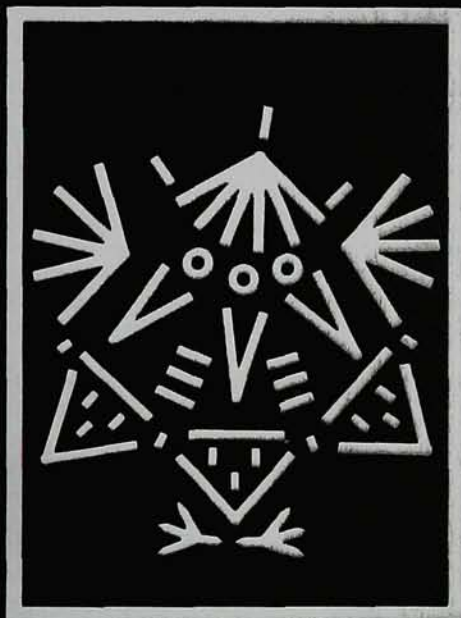


Photo from LE MERLE
A film by Norman McLaren

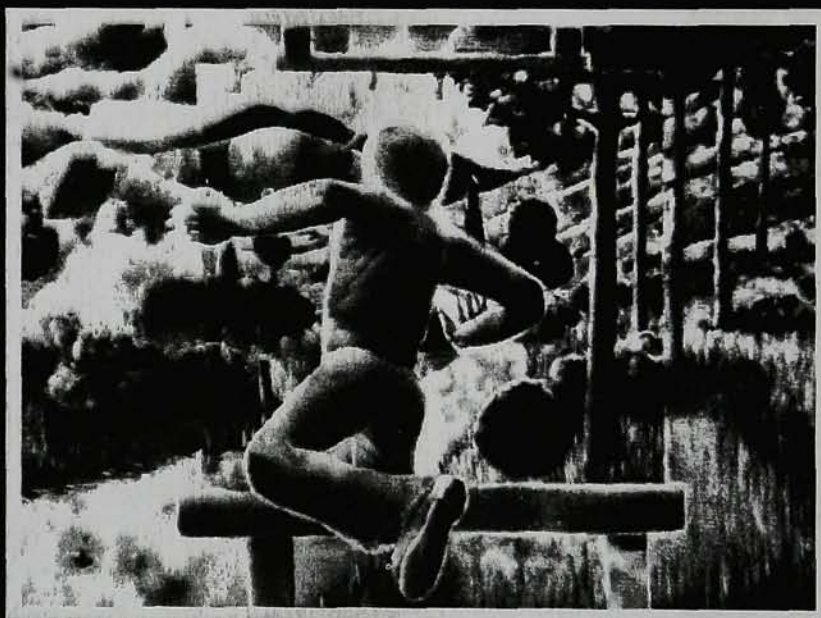


Photo from MINDSCAPE
A film by Jacques Drouin



National
Film Board
of Canada

Office
national du film
du Canada