



# RENÉ JODOIN

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## FRENCH ANIMATION



In 1941, two years after the creation of the National Film Board, Film Commissioner John Grierson invited animator Norman McLaren of Scotland to join the Board as head of its animation department. Thus began the Board's active and creative association with animated film, a most important facet of NFB production.

René Jodoin, head of French production's animation department since the mid 1960's, joined the Board's fledgling animation department in the early 40's. His early work included the direction of three short animated films — *Carry on, Alouette*, and *Quadrille* — segments in the English-language musical animated film series, *Let's All Sing Together*. Jodoin left the Board in 1948, but returned in 1954 continuing his work primarily in English production since an autonomous French unit had not yet been formed. In 1965, he commenced work as head of the French unit's animation department.

His work on a 1950's NFB series of scientific films for classroom use had inspired his interest in the creation of an animated film format "that would be attractive to people generally and, when used in the context of education, would be valuable in more ways than one. I tried to establish a type of film that would correspond to a filmmaker's objective as well as to the role of passing on a certain kind of information."

As a result, Jodoin directed several award-winning animated films in the 1960's which explored geometric shapes including the square (in *Ronde carrée* or "Dance Squared") and the triangle (in *Notes on a Triangle*). The response, especially to *Notes on a Triangle*, was "tremendously encouraging" says Jodoin and not only at the festival level: direct feedback received from a wide range of people, from physicists to housewives, was "most interesting" because "the film is nothing in a sense, it's what the film is *doing*" and how people are reacting to it — learning from it as well as appreciating it as a film.

Withing the animation department, the key words are exploration and experimentation, as various modes of animation are being exploited in an attempt to expand the expressiveness of film animation. It is a search "not in any way limited to drawings," says Jodoin.

An association between the Board and NRC (National Research Council) has been established to explore the capabilities of computer technology in the realm of film beyond the so-called "computer graphics" — originally developed for industrial use (such as in the creation and testing of aircraft designs) — which have encouraged some computer experts to attempt to become artists. But Jodoin notes that such experts are often too impressed by the computer's ability to create "interesting images".

Evidence that the Board's work in computerized animation has gone far beyond the creation of interesting individual images is found in Peter Foldes' *La Faim/Hunger*, winner of the special jury prize for Best Short at the 1974 Cannes Film Festival. "In *La Faim*, Jodoin explains, "the object was to push the system as far as it would go." Rather than a collection of abstract images, *La Faim* employed a script conceived in the traditional manner without concern for the peculiarities of computer programming. Foldes' drawings form the visual basis of the film, the end result retaining the essence of the drawings' original artistry but with the computer having

imposed something very rich. With *La Faim* the preoccupation was "to have a dynamic continuity of idea" and a gradual evolution of idea as well as image. For Jodoin, film is not solely a visual medium — its visual quality must have some unifying purpose. "We've been swamped with all kinds of technologies," he notes, "People just press buttons, cut all this together, and then want you to sit there. I get very bored watching most things that are being done."

Despite the Board's progress in the use of computers in film-making, Jodoin finds that computers are still primitive in terms of manipulation of film time at will. Nevertheless, a marvellous potential is there. "Animation with this kind of tool can achieve a dramatic impact it never could before, because you can exceed conventional modes of animation and technology. Computer technology allows you to choose times that are beyond the economic possibilities of conventional animation. For one thing, you can go beyond the high speed camera and change an image perceptibly without the viewer knowing when it changed. So you can have vertical montage of time which could be incredibly dense yet quite accessible to an audience which senses things but doesn't quite know *why* it is experiencing something until later."

Other modes of animation being explored within Jodoin's department and used in recent NFB films include: pixillation; drawing on film (a technique pioneered by McLaren); a film with drawings done, as Jodoin describes, "directly on paper in monotype so that an engraving effect is achieved with a character very rich artistically, and a technique not seen in industry" (i.e. outside the creative experimental atmosphere of NFB animation departments); a film in which the drawings have been done on paper with a brush; a film with blocks animated in two and three dimensions; i.e. with animation on the blocks which are themselves animated; and a film exploring further the possibilities of paper cut-out animation.

Guest animators continue to play an important role at the Board. Czechoslovakian Bretislav Pojar (visiting last year) won further recognition for the NFB in the animation field by receiving the Grand Prix for Best Short film at Cannes 1973 for *Balablok*, a film in a style Jodoin describes as "a marriage of cut-outs and cell animation." Such guests introduce their particular techniques and thus assist the NFB's animators in developing skills they can incorporate into their creation of new styles and techniques.

The English-language animation department headed by Wolf Koenig, is presently producing a series of films on Canadian poetry; the French-language department is concentrating on individual films and has no immediate plans for any animated series.

The departments meanwhile continue to rack up prizes in international film festivals. Norman McLaren was recently honoured with the Unicin prize at a retrospective of his films at the Berlin Film Festival for his outstanding film accomplishments over the years; and two more NFB animation films, *Au bout du fil* and *Animation from Cape Dorset* recently won awards at the World Animation Film Festival in Zagreb, Yugoslavia. *Au bout du fil*, directed by Paul Driessen, was awarded a prize for artistic achievement and *Animation from Cape Dorset*, done by Eskimo artists from that area won the Jury Award for "the amazing discovery of new possibilities in animation"