

# the loneliness of the short subject filmmaker

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Short subject filmmakers need persistence and stamina, especially those like Bruce Pittman who make few compromises. Michael Asti-Rose likens Pittman to a long-distance runner on a winning streak. Last year, he completed two half-hour dramas, **Hailey's Gift** and **Magic Man**.

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by Michael Asti-Rose



photo: Brigette Nielsen

Magic Man begins with a child's boredom

"I sit alone a lot," says Bruce Pittman, 29. In his tweed cap and navy-blue overcoat, sitting on a park bench in Toronto's High Park, the joggers could well be disdainful of his thoughtful repose. The long-distance runners, however they might regard this post-war baby, now grown to full filmmaker-hood, are unlikely to guess that Bruce Pittman's marathon run for the big break is as rigorous and as strenuous as theirs.

Pittman is just as religious as jogging fanatics in his dedication to the long, lonely pursuit of powerful short films that strive to be unflawed and usually achieve that end, "A short film doesn't have time to recover from a mistake. You blow it once and you blow the film," says Pittman, who looks unlikely as a perfectionist with his stringy hair, his diffident manner and his steel-gray eyes that might be those of dreamy Gibran or visionary William Blake. For firstly Bruce Pittman is a poet: perhaps Etobicoke's only poet.

He is certainly the only Canadian poet since the era when versifiers were commissioned to write poems to order, who is readily able to attract backers and investors who are *not* seeking a tax loss, but hoping for profits and a tax problem. Pittman's films sell. They find their way into schools and onto national television, and they attract the sort of money that is not usually associated with Canadian non-theatrical films.

The early films which Pittman shot, wrote and edited were products of a spring-wound Bolex. Saturating the track with Vaughan William's **Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis**, the first classic was nine-minute **Form, Beauty, Motion**. Ostensibly a filler for television, it is evidently more than fill and has gone on to sell over 40 prints. The film has a hard-edge, butterfly lighting that transforms a pubescent girl gymnast into an apparition of Dali protoplasm, and slow-motion that metamorphoses the mechanics of eurhythmics into cinematic ballet more exquisite than Karen Kain could dance live. It innovates with jump cuts

and double-edits that begin where Eisenstein started, but leave off where montage and music are such close bedfellows that the dynamism zaps the viewer; he or she becomes the filmmaker *and* the gymnast.

But a filmmaker who is prepared to take risks in his exploration of the medium is bound to fail from time to time: **Fable of The Body** is the Pittman film that represents the first experimental animal that did not survive vivisection. An

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*Michael Asti-Rose is a filmmaker, writer, publisher and lecturer whose comedy Silent Movie received the Etrog Special Jury Award in 1975. At present he is completing editing of The Voyage of the Nylund which was shot during a year-long voyage on a 54' schooner in the vicinity of England and France.*



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# pittman on film

## On the Rules of Filmmaking

*"After 'don't bore,' my second rule is to follow the Oxford Dictionary definition of the word simplicity. What's the story? Do it simply. At every phase of production, do it simply."*

## On the Subtleties of Filmmaking

*"It's like the guy who has a blind date – and it turns out that the girl he's taking out for the evening is blind. And he starts looking up her dress, until he realizes that her 'blindness' is only an act."*

## On Holding Your Audience

*"I like what Lean said, 'My aim with Lawrence was that they'll never get that first cigarette lighted in three-and-a-half hours.'"*

## On the Best Kind of Film

*"If you get a really good film that's funny, it's the best kind of film."*

## On Editing Your Own Films

*"It's the best part of doing the film. I've often heard the argument that you're too close to it. The only people who can make a feeling film are close to it. And I can be pretty ruthless with my own work."*

## On Films That Hurt

*"If you're having problems, make sure they're problems with what the film's all about. But, ultimately, if you don't have fun making the film, I don't think there's much point in making it."*

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# cinema canada





Uncle Ambrose's slight of hand

attempt to evoke the dualism of the cat as both demon and domestic angel presence, this mis-judged homage to Bosch and Doré etchings, comes across like a selection of cat-food commercials interspliced with Kenneth Clark outtakes from **Civilization**.

"The film doesn't work," says Pittman, who is honest enough to recognize failure, "but it has its moments."

Exploring the medium further, Pittman took the theme of the solitary individual in the world of athletics, making an improbably Kierkegaard of an Argo football player up again in another existential film poem, this time shot at Toronto's Canadian National Exhibition during an exhibition game. In **Line of Scrimmage** (1974) once again Vaughan Williams' **Tallis Fantasia** provides the musical basis: the slow-motion movements of hulking jock-strappers recalls simulations of dinosaurs mating in Hollywood B-films of the 1960's, but the stretched frame-cross of cheerleaders and a uniformed band evokes shades of religious extravaganzas as does the musical peak-out at touch-down. "Man Alone," however, remains the message of the first frame and the last where the shoulder-padded pyrotechnicist of ball-play huddled like Rodin's **Thinker**, a muscular existential question brewing.

"I am," and "I am who?" are the alternating frame and frame-line of Bruce Pittman's filmography. And in two sensitive half-hour drama completed in the last year, **Hailey's Gift** and **Magic Man**, Pittman has revealed that he is more than a virtuoso practitioner of the *sum laudem* student film.

Moving slowly into work with actors, walking when you sense he could really run, Pittman's lucent grey eyes give the secret away before you see a frame of his dramas. He has an uncanny ability to discover and select actors, direct them and choose locations suited to a wide dynamic range. In fact **Hailey's Gift** was a story that mushroomed out of the discovery of a small town dominated by a huge swing-bridge and a large fairground. Its rotting Upper Canada mansions made ideal material for intimations of a haunting, and by the time he was familiar with this place, Pittman's film had virtually written itself. Kate Parr at nine produces the definitive interpretation of a woman-child who gets to the heart of a man, in this case a tramp entrepreneur, Hailey McMoon, played sensitively by Barry Morse. McMoon is the town's legendary carnival operator as well as the ec-

### On Film's Kinship to Literature

"I think film has a lot more to do with music and dance than it has with literature."

### On Being an *Auteur* Filmmaker

"I have become an *auteur* director out of protection. Nobody's going to hand me the films I want to make. I have to generate them."

### On Parents

"The conversation always evaporates quickly when we get onto my career. But they always let me blunder into things and make mistakes, 'Give it a try,' they always said, which is the biggest gift parents can give to a child, the go-ahead to risk something."

### On the Rush to Direct Features

"Kubrick made three films before **Paths of Glory**. It's a little known fact because Kubrick's bought up all the prints. I make a point of seeing the great director's first films. And even those are a cautionary **no** to anyone in a rush to direct features."

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centric dragon sitting on a horde of Victorian collectibles that turn out to be as much a part of the collective unconscious of a small Ontario town as the carnival itself.

Pittman's sentimental and enigmatic answer to the girl's question "Who am I?" is articulated when the freckled Jenny, in her plaits and awkwardness, makes a gift to Hailey B. McMoon of a small Victorian amulet on which a Jenny wren is painted. The amulet is her treasure and the wren is her private totem. As she turns her smouldering eyes away from McMoon and the camera, Pittman reveals his master-stroke, which is to have Hailey pull a small Victorian amulet box out of his pocket. Inside the tiny box, the velvet form is contoured in the exact shape of the wren amulet. As he closes the lid, hands trembling with emotion, we see that on the lid is enamelled — a wren.

This symbol of reciprocity between the generations baffles adult viewers, says Pittman. "Though an 8-year-old in a creative writing class who saw the film explained the riddle this way: 'Hailey gave the wren pendant to Jenny's grandmother, and he returns every generation to take it back. Then he gives it away again.' I was staggered to hear this come from a kid when adults had repeatedly said, 'I don't get it,' " says Pittman, who values children as arbiters of taste only second to himself. "One of my three rules of filmmaking is, 'I'm making this film only to please myself.' I've asked Altman, I've asked Peckinpah. They say pretty much the same. There's a danger in playing too hard to the market and ending up with a film that pleases no one, least of all yourself."

But this does not constitute license for indulgent films when you take the "I-clause" along with Pittman's two other rules:

Never bore, and keep it simple.

Some would say that Pittman's latest film, **Magic Man**, is not simple. The half-hour drama premiered in January at a Toronto reception studded with moneyed guests who were lavishly courted with plate after plate of sandwiches and a perpetually replenished punch bowl that could easily hold all the film cans of Pittman's entire *oeuvre*.

In fact boredom is the starting point of **Magic Man**. Nicholas, **Magic Man**'s child star, is a bored first grader who wants to be like Uncle Ambrose, who is an amateur magician and as sentimental at heart as Pittman himself. The film goes all the way out into space and back to show that Nicholas' daydreams of being an astronaut, like Uncle Ambrose's sleight of hand, will take perseverance and hard work. A simple notion to build a film around, but in Pittman's hands the realisation verges on the baroque. Nevertheless, the film works: for Pittman's simplicity rule has been applied religiously to the tempo, the framing, the lighting and the consistent earth colors of the film's design. We forgive the comatose Copland that waxes orgasmic and threatens to swamp us in emotion. The narrative thread, however tenuous, does hold us, because we are convinced that someone who can handle the medium with such a strong sense of inner structure won't let us down. **Magic Man** ends with a bang, and no whimper. It works — though one is not quite sure why.

Pittman is serious about the look of his films. He works with the same cameraman, Mark Irwin, wherever possible and sketches out complete visual scenarios with as much dedication as a Sefferelli. The decisive camera movements, the inspired cuts and the ease of the transitions owe a heavy debt to the readiness to compose the moving picture as carefully as one does the film score.

The only artistic compromise that Pittman seems ready to make is to the tyranny of marketing factors. He reckons that a film of his has succeeded when print sales to the educational market reach 100 sold in Canada and 650 in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. And that means a film can't exceed 18 minutes. "Schools won't even screen a film that runs four minutes over that," says Pittman. And he was forced to lop eleven minutes off **Hailey's Gift** for the analogous market demand of T.V. time slots, with their rigid segmenting of viewer consciousness.

But Bruce Pittman is not the sort to be discouraged easily by the tyranny of the market. He is a long distance filmmaker, obstacles notwithstanding. Though in lugging films around to screenings in a hessian bag he may occasionally moan, "The problem with film is it's too heavy," if Pittman can keep his light touch as a director with that weighty sense of substance in his work, success will probably allow him someone else to cart around the ten-reelers when that day arrives.



Bruce Pittman, Etobicoke's only poet

### On Actors

*"They are strange and wonderful people. 90 percent of a movie is made in the casting. My only acting experience was playing a corpse: that I did well."*

### On Auditioning Actors

*"Are we going to get along? When we look eyeball to eyeball and talk, I make the decision. I trust my instincts on that as we talk and talk. I don't use auditions and set pieces: I think they're unfair."*

### On Children

*"I don't ever remember thinking of myself as a child. I thought of myself as a person. So I made that film **Magic Man** for me. I know I'm still that kid."*

### On Tax Clauses for Backers

*"I never sell a film as a tax loss. I go into it because I believe it will be a success. And I sell it to backers as a potential tax problem."*