

SHORT FILMS

Rick Hancox



I love short, independent, experimental, non-theatrical, underground, non-commercial, avant-garde, expanded, syncategoric or whatever you want to call them films. I wish the whole world would make them, sell them, buy them, screen them, televise them, teach them, learn them, eat, drink, and sleep with them – I'll certainly go on and on making them. I'm even considering designing an old-folks-home-hospital-bed-editing-bench.

I guess that's what I meant when I originally began this article with some sort of lamenting political lobby about too much feature film infatuation. Although some of my best friends are features, there's more to cinematic life, and more people should have a chance to know about it.

One thing that's really going to help along the way is the National Gallery of Canada's **Canadian Filmmakers Series**, which received a fine introduction by Natalie Edwards in the last issue (*Cinema Canada* No. 13, "Moving Art", p. 54). The Series consists of four ninety-minute programs of short films selected by the National Gallery for exhibition in cooperating galleries and institutions across Canada, and in Europe, via the Gallery's National Programme extension service. The Series' chief producer, the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, says it contains "thirty of Canada's most relevant experimental films... Combined, they represent a cross-section of one of our country's most important cultural contributions".

Natalie Edwards' article explored some of the films in one of the Series' four programmes. I'd like to follow that up by touching upon just a few of the twenty-five other works offered. I have seen all but three of the films: Mike Collier's *Watercolours*, Brigitte Sauriol's *Le Loup Blanc*, and Gillies Gagné's *Les Étoiles et Autres Corps*.

Natalie mentioned in the last issue that "the packages... may inspire many heavy discussions and arguments on the uses of film". On this I must agree and take issue right away with that part of Lorne Marin's *Rhapsody on a Theme from A House Movie* which she didn't like. I do not find the film "emotionless and deliberately uninvolved", but quite the opposite. The romantic Rachmaninoff track should be clue

enough – if one must infer intent – that the furthest thing from Marin's mind is uninvolvedness. You've got to break through that initial awareness of his fascinating in-camera dissolve technique, in which shots along his street slightly overlap and fuse into each other momentarily, to see it not as a "gimmick", but a *device* – and one which succeeds in communicating a unique, warm, personal vision of a particular human landscape.

Neither will computers regulate such films, as Natalie suggests, for *Rhapsody* was *edited* in the camera: the points at which Marin fades out one scene, winds back the film, and fades in the next, occur on precise subject motions within the frame – and all of it requiring personal decision. But whether or not computers and robots are implicated, ultimately what matters is what's up there on the screen. In the case of this film, it is about as close to magic as the cinema ever gets.

Another film where the technique approaches magic is Jean-Claude Labrecque's *Essai à la Mille*, in the fourth program of the Canadian Filmmakers Series. The most powerful scene, shot from seven miles away using a 1000mm lens, shows railway tracks leading from the foreground of the frame into a distant approaching train, with a level crossing in between. Labrecque's virtuoso lens technique mashes the distant objects up together, making them appear closer than they really are, and creating quite a tension as the occasional truck crosses the tracks as the train seemingly bears down upon them. The lens also captures thousands of varying wavelengths of heat rising off the tracks, and the compression of their depth perspective causes the entire scene to ripple and undulate as if under water. It's strikingly beautiful, but it took a cinematic device to wrench from reality what would otherwise be invisible – and that's magic, pure and simple. So why the filmmaker felt it necessary to impose from the outside that pseudo magical-mystical quotation in the beginning – and that heavy, overbearing, chanting soundtrack – is beyond me. The difference with Lorne Marin's technical virtuosity, for example, is that he lets it speak for itself, and so should Labrecque. Nevertheless *Essai à la Mille* is among my favourite films in the Series.

Another favourite is Leon Marr's *Fountain*, although it has a similar flaw to the Labrecque film. The subject of the film is simply one of those antiseptically repulsive, common-place water fountains, stuck on an equally antiseptic, concrete-block wall, in the sterile hallway of one of those architectural disasters we call schools. That's the subject. But the content of the film is so much more! Marr creates an entire cinematic world out of nothing, and precisely because it is nothing, every camera angle and shot size, every compositional detail, every movement of the camera takes on enormous surrealistic proportions. Technically so simple but composed in a way we'd never notice in reality, the fountain is transformed into a thing of absolute beauty.

The film has an absurdly erotic sequence with a girl in a white satin blouse caressing the tap, and sort of deep-throating the spouting water. Then there is an amusing, up-tempo, baroque music sequence in which Marr quick-cuts dozens of different close-ups of various people turning the tap in their own, uniquely personal ways. But while the fountain is a thing of beauty, it is not a joy forever, for at this point in the film Marr cuts off the sequence with a giant, close-up, stubbing-out-of-a-cigarette on the beautiful white porcelain. What follows is more cigarette-stubbing, garbage dumping, and other junk – all of it to scary, electronic music – until our deep throat girl goes to take another drink: alas, she shakes her head in

disgust and walks away. It's as if Marr, losing confidence in the beautiful minimality of his image, felt compelled to moralize, dramatize, or otherwise make a point. The point is, it's another case of a filmmaker marring his work by unnecessarily interpreting-for-the-audience the good thing he has obviously discovered.

On the other hand, Michael Snow's *Standard Time*, in the fourth program of the Series, contains minimal qualities which are uncluttered and left to stand on their own merits. True, Snow incorporates what appear to be familiar dramatic elements, as he does in *Wavelength* but they remain simply a part of the overall composition and are not an interference — as shocking as his timing makes them. If this article were the place I would rather discuss Snow's later film \longleftrightarrow , which continues *Standard Time*'s original spatial approach (via a camera panning technique) to even greater heights, and widths.

Another film in the Series whose good things are left intact, and not artificially manipulated from the outside, is Joyce Wieland's *Solidarity*. Not that manipulation is itself some kind of sin, since art is artifice, but there's a difference between a work where the manipulations satisfy an internal need, and one which is manipulated to the point of looking false, artificial and awkward. The internal need of *Solidarity*'s subject — a strike — is met primarily by Wieland's camera manipulations, showing close-ups of only the strikers' feet, and by the title 'Solidarity' superimposed throughout the entire film. It might sound like a radically esoteric treatment for such a real and solid social issue — and it is — but the film's form is precisely as solid, radical, and recalcitrant as the strikers themselves. Aren't strikes dependent upon feet — how long you can stand, march, wait — feet planted solidly and down-to-earth together as the camera reveals them? Shouldn't the call for solidarity be as relentless as the superimposed title indicates? I appreciate the originality of this film. Originality is important to me because I want to learn more in a film than what I already knew. In so many ways *Solidarity* teaches more about what it's like to be on strike than all the unimaginative and established documentary manipulations the media normally dares show on this subject.

The National Gallery selected three of David Rimmer's films: *Real Italian Pizza*, *Blue Movie*, and *Migration*. I liked

(left to right) Lorne Marin's boots, unidentifiable co-op member, Judy Steed, Rick Hancox, another u.c.m., Joyce Wieland and Keith Lock

Migration (1969), but I liked *Real Italian Pizza*, his latest film, even better. I don't think *Blue Movie* (1970) belongs in the Series, since Rimmer is otherwise represented by two fine films so superior to *Blue Movie* they make it look like just another decorative artifact. *Real Italian Pizza* is, beyond a doubt, one of the best films I have ever seen. It's one of those films you can see over and over again, and each time thrill to new discoveries.

The film documents the life of a pizza place in New York City (called 'Real Italian Pizza') from the fall of 1970 to the spring of '71. The images are all high-angle long shots of the store's facade filmed from Rimmer's apartment window across the street. From a lot of footage that was doubtless shot over the eight-month period, Rimmer has cut in only particular takes — as opposed to single-framing the whole thing, which was my understanding when I first met him in New York in 1970 — and then with typical Rimmer el-cheapo-home-optical-printing finesse, step-prints, freeze-frames, loop-prints and otherwise rephotographs some of his footage. It all adds up to only ten minutes, but I understand there exists somewhere a longer, silent version some say is better. Well, as much as Rimmer has hacked and hewed away at it, I'm convinced a few minutes here and there aren't going to make much difference to an already successful concept which isn't communicated primarily through temporal structure anyway, as is the case with Rimmer's *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*.

Real Italian Pizza works with that same real-life fascination of simply staring at something — but it's even more compelling because we are obviously getting a candid look: a police raid, a false fire alarm, all manner of people passing by — from two high-school football teams to Rimmer himself, eating pizza. And throughout it all, like guards of their rightful territory, the local 'bad dudes' hang out — panhandling, intimidating, making deals, laughing, dancing. In winter you recognize the same ones, this time all in identical long, dark overcoats, and again in spring, wearing shiny red or green pants rendered fluorescent by Rimmer's rephotography. These are the real 'heroes' of the film — the guys posing every day under the sign which reads: "Pizza-Heros"; the guys brave enough to wrest some spontaneous joy out of the New York cityscape.

The film's magnetic hold over our interest has more going



Photo: Baltazar



for it than just candid staring. It flows over with Rimmer's mastery for the kind of paradox in a camera composition with 'Buy Pepsi' in each of the frame's upper corners, and 'Drink Coke' in each of the lower; of the kind of tension created by a rephotography technique which freeze-frames the scene after the panhandler walks out-of-frame on another try — and thereby never brings him back from his 'victim'; and of the kind of perception which reveals a façade like 'Real Italian Pizza', when there is no pizza in Italy, and no Italy in the pizza stand, and the statement itself a sign on a store façade. But the ultimate compelling puzzle in Rimmer's film is the trapped and diminutive psychological rendering of the 'anti-heroes', as caused by the unchanging tight composition and high camera angle, when seen against theirs — and Rimmer's — free and gargantuan creative joy.

On an entirely different level of joy is **Thanksgiving**, by Ken Wallace, in the third program of the Series. The film is about a plucked, cleaned, and ready-to-cook turkey which suddenly hops out of the stove, and via stop-frame animation, attempts to escape. The thing has huge, glass eyes embedded just above its thighs, and uses its wings as a sort of rear propulsion to push itself along the floor. And as if this ass-backwardness were not enough, the thing pauses occasionally to sort of wink for the camera. In other words, Wallace animates its very skin.

Such a laborious pixillation procedure must have taken the filmmaker well into the madness of night, for eventually the turkey starts to dry up. And the later it gets, the gummier it gets, with an added surrealistic bonus: a hideous kinetic relationship develops between the illusion of motion as created by the object pixillation (which goes as far as making the thing suck in its own skin in lip-sync sound), and the object's actual motion during an exposure — caused, for example, when the skin sticks to the floor and then suddenly catches up with the body. This relationship is even better when it tries to go down the stairs, by which time the filmmaker, having grown impatient with the animation procedure, momentarily allows his protagonist to sort of sag down from one step to the next in real time. Briefly you wonder if it's *really* coming to life.

Eventually it escapes out the back door, only to be chased back in by a hungry cat. As it sits there panting — not knowing where to ooze next — you acutally begin to sympathize and identify with the poor thing. But the crushing blow comes with the sudden and dramatic appearance of the shadow of an axe, which quickly and with absurdly brutal force, is sunk into the thing, thus ending the film (except for a brief title card reading simply, "Thank-you"). My only regret is that the filmmaker let the thing back into the house: it would have been a better ending simply to let it go off menacingly into the night.

Two of my favourite films in the Series are Jim Anderson's **Yonge Street**, and **R.O.M.** I'll only attempt a discussion of **Yonge Street** here, a profound film which is so together conceptually and esthetically there is just not a single flaw. I don't know exactly how the film came about, but it looks as though Anderson took a 400-foot roll of film, and with

lip-sync equipment, simply headed down Toronto's Yonge Street prepared to film whatever happened.

On the way down Yonge there are quick glimpses of shop windows, people selling their wares on the street, jingling Hare Krishnas, billboards, posters, marquees — advertising everything from skinflicks to wrestling matches — congested traffic and pedestrians, and then the architectural coldness below Queen Street. As Anderson reaches the tunnel under the railway yards he suddenly breaks into a run. The sound bursts into a high-pitched deafening roar. You become desperate to break through the increasing claustrophobic tension. And then, just as suddenly, you are through. Before you on the screen is the wide open expanse of a white, frozen-over Lake Ontario, filmed with such relative stilness it is like some heavenly reward. It's as if you had flowed down Yonge Street along with all the pollution of life and in the terror and darkness of the tunnel met death, and finally felt your body emptied with the rest of the waste into the lake.

As the camera peacefully scans the water there is a feeling that everything is being cleansed. A ferry quietly chugs across the frame through ice which is starting to break up, and like a rebirth from the very water from which life began, the camera begins to turn around: Anderson plants the camera in a snowbank, points it at himself, and heads back into the city — starting the cycle all over again — just as the film runs out. While there is probably a complication of philosophies in **Yonge Street**, the film nevertheless strikes some primal chord with nothing more than ringing clarity.

How the Hell Are You, by Veronika Šoul, is a film which nary a person I've met has not adored, and it is certainly one of my favourites in the Canadian Filmmakers Series. The film has been ably described a number of times already by writers in *Cinema Canada*. There is just one point I want to make: it must be very hard to make a film like this *about* artsy-craftsy cuteness without having it come off looking so artsy-craftsy and cute that all the spontaneity is zapped right out of it. That **How the Hell Are You** surmounts this difficulty completely attests to the degree of understanding and control Veronika Šoul has over her work.

Before I end by discussing what may well be my favourite film in the entire Series, Michael Ondaatje's **Sons of Captain Poetry**, I want to first relate an experience my wife had a few years ago. One day the toilet sort of exploded when Barbara flushed it. As she was complaining about having been *seated* on it at the time, a friend interrupted: "Barbara, you know that *is* the correct way". She was serious. In **Sons of Captain Poetry**, the poet B.P. Nichol relates a story of a man who noticed that a dog's whole body *ripples* when it goes number two. "If only I could get my students to shit like that!", says B.P. At this point in the film Ondaatje cuts to some step-printing of a dog with a long tail stiff between its legs, like an enormous erection. The point of all this is found partially in a line from one of Nichol's poems: "Don't you know your body enhances the things you want to say?". Later, when Nichol is being interviewed in the film, he says something like "Let me think . . .", whereby instead of touching his forehead — as Colombo would do — he momentarily taps his stomach, and the thought comes to him.

Sons of Captain Poetry is a gutsy film. It's more than a good documentary on B.P. Nichol: for some reason I have seen a good number of attempts to marry film and poetry, but this is by far the best. Because the film is forty minutes long, dense, and complex, I cannot do it justice — although I have seen it seven times — in the space of this article. It really needs a separate treatment. I would like to add, however, that I think an appropriate ending to this article on such a diversity of films would be to quote one of B.P. Nichol's motivations behind his concrete sound and visual poetry: ". . . (In today's culture) . . . the only survival technique is to become a master of as many perceptual systems as possible". A study of this fine National Gallery collection of thirty films cannot help but expand one's perceptual awareness a great deal.



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