
Packages of short, experimental films are not readily available to potential audiences, and discussions about 'film as art' seldom take place. Natalie Edwards tells us of a recent incentive by the National Gallery and the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre which should help the distribution of a dozen of these films and, hopefully, provoke a lot of debate.

it's film all right, but is it art ?

by Natalie Edwards



Boardinghouse by Neil McInnes and Ken Stampnick.

A couple of cans of spicy, unusual, experimental film fare are available through the National Gallery and the Canadian Filmmaker's Distribution Centre, for loan to interested galleries and organizations across Canada.

Last year four programs of films were packaged, distributed and solidly booked into a dozen centres (from late September 1975 through March 1976) from the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, P.E.I. to the Victoria Theatre Box in Victoria, B.C. New audiences were introduced to a selection of the most innovative, fresh filmmaking in Canada today.

This year's package of two reels of film, or two 'programs' comprising only a dozen films by eight artists, is a much reduced selection compared to last year's abundant offering of some thirty films representing two dozen filmmakers. This is too bad and gives the impression that there is now less activity in the experimental field. Actually, however, since the size of the package last year represented a backlog of seldom seen and therefore often unappreciated work that had accumulated over the years, this year's lesser amount simply may mean the National Gallery is settling on a quantity that they will be able to afford to back consistently for a long-term yearly program.

The first reel contains six short films. **Boardinghouse**, an animated surreal work in strong rich poster colors, is the creation of Neil McInnes and Ken Stampnick who made it in 1972-3 after graduating from the Manitoba Institute of Applied Arts. Although it seems influenced more by European animation rather than North American Studio Styles, its thick texture and Magritte-like approach make it totally distinctive, and its purely visual non-story gives it the feel of a very solid strange daydream. It is an excellent opener for the series, entertaining and totally logical in its own terms.

The second film is actually titled **Surreal**, and is a four minute study of views and relationships caused by size and framing and imposed by the artist on sea and landscapes. Kim Cross uses frames within frames: on a sandy beach for instance, we see what at first glance appears to be a picture or a mirror, in which we see waves crashing or windblown trees. Against the water we see inner frames of land or sky. Music by John Mills-Cockell is more than a background. In many ways in fact the intriguing visuals work as an accompaniment to his delicate and sinuous sounds.

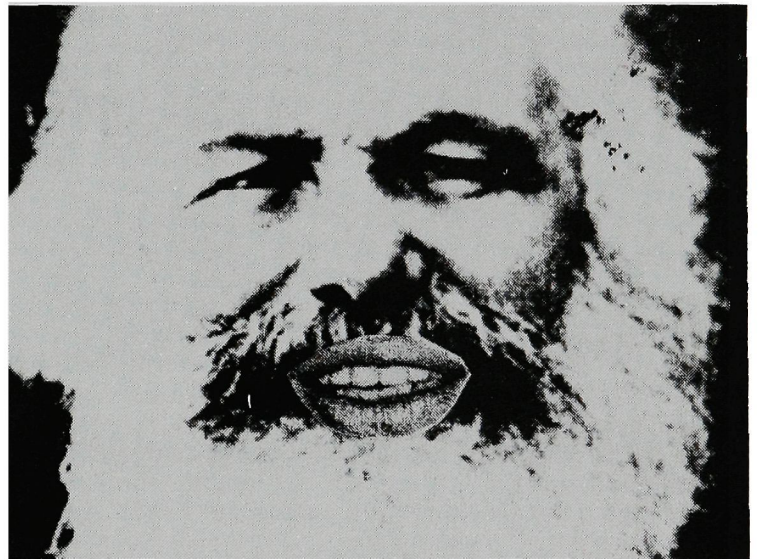
Second Impressions by Lorne Marin is the third film on reel one. Marin involves the viewer in his process: the rushing sound of the projector dominates the opening sequence in which we see within the frame, the projector screen and the ill-defined nostalgic home-movie projection. After the 'show' the screen lights up momentarily on its own, as a clue, and despite its removal, the images of the past take over. The fading, appearing, disappearing moments of time, the varying views from the window, the shifts of size and importance in objects, the passing of people, recapitulated actions and endlessly repeated movements have a life of their own, and in a brilliant synthesis of fades and overlaps and superimpositions and time lapse sequences Marin constructs a lyrical flow of sound and memory, ephemeral, transient and touching.

Reel one, fourth film. **Le Voyage** (1973) is Al Razutis' seven minutes of sound and color explosion, with high contrast reds and yellows blossoming to an eerie electronic sound track. A cloud shape passing over the moon triggers all the sound and fury, and the thunder, flame and lightning effects are partially a ballet of flame and fury, modified and muffled as if distanced by passing eons. It is like watching the surface of the sun or the history of the end of the world from a very long distance emotionally and physically.

Another 1973 experimental film is **Fracture** by David Rimmer. Two more of his works are on the second reel,

making him the most represented of the artists included. **Fracture** is partly a simple breakdown and study of the separated frames of a movement. A girl with a baby in a woods stares, moves, rises, gestures. The baby begins a movement. This piece of film is intercut with a person opening a cabin door and looking out. The fracture here is of light and space. At first insufficient light and too magnified a view make the visible mysterious, but gradually in each inserted section we see a little more and understand more of what we see. The girl with baby sequence is shown both forward and backward. We have an opportunity to examine almost every frame separately as the action jerkily proceeds and is repeated, each time with slightly more added. Suspense, mystery, curiosity, multiply as bit by bit the full cycle of action is revealed. Then, we examine all the components of the movement and the emotional reaction evoked, aware of body language, the implications of gesture and gaze, the tension of protracted time.

This 11 minutes illustrates more of the basic nature of film, and its semiotics than many a lecture series, and would be intriguing to use as a short in combination with a good Hitchcock for a study of applied technique.



Tales from the Vienna Woods by Veronika Soul.

Finally, reel one concludes with Veronika Soul's 1973-4 **Tales from the Vienna Woods**. This amalgam of impressions, cut-outs, clippings, inserts, photos, action sequences and so on, offers an avalanche of information and trivia culled or inspired from the letters of Sigmund Freud. Once you know that, you can enjoy its muddled, deliberately obscure and often hilarious happenings, but for a first viewing one must be content with the medley rather than the meaning, unless more hints are given than this soul of wit offers in the early frames.

The second reel opens with **Seeds**, a long 3½ minutes by John Gaug of mathematical variations of black and white patterns on graph paper, disconcertingly accompanied by Handel's music, under the common impression that the stately, orderly and genteel patterns of the music somehow relate to the repetitive, nervous and even crude re-ordering of space offered by multiple exposure of twelve drawings in a variety of permutations and combinations. Many people find this playing with patterns and combinations enchanting.

Visual Alchemy is the second short on reel two. The frustrations of attempting to capture the essence of the holographic image and its being-non-being in space affects the viewer despite the fascination this effort compels. Crimson images on black, the rushing tick of a clock sound, indistinctly heard information, just out of reach of understanding (sound text is written by Al Razutis, the filmmaker, and includes excerpts from the writings of Carl

Jung) and dimly understood visuals in the end create an eight minute fluctuating, pulsing, light and sound voyage that can too easily become a background for private day-dreaming rather than maintain interest solely on the basis of its own explorations.

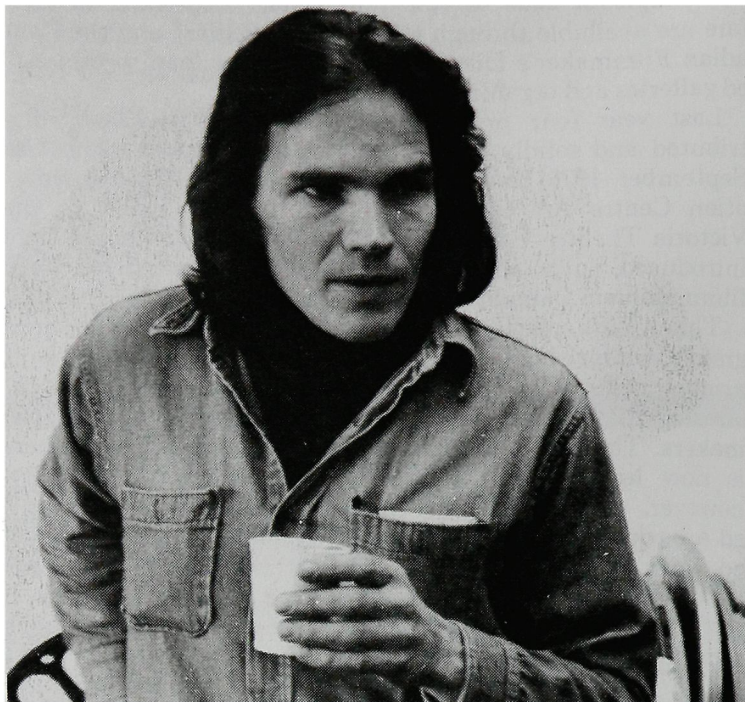
Watching for the Queen, a 1973 silent film by David Rimmer, on the other hand, commands attention despite the fact its 11 minute study of a sea of human faces is structured entirely out of two seconds (48 frames) of film. At first the viewer examines the hundred or so faces for their expressions, their differences, their mass emotion, using the variety of ways we have all learned to keep interested, discover information, search for clues. At the point when the prolonged picture creates resentment and impatience, there is also a compensating sensation of reluctant admiration for the almighty gall of Rimmer, forcing this examination on the viewer without explanation. Thus the jerky broken zoom bringing the group steadily closer comes both as a relief and as a new way of manipulating attention. Time is stretched now as patience was formerly. Faces at the front begin to disappear; those at the last row become less indistinct. The film forces terrific concentrated inter-reaction between viewer and picture. Using slowly receding or approaching zoom until the viewer discovers the pattern of the exercise, Rimmer takes his time until every variation of almost every expression of almost every face is noted by the intense viewer. At this point sad faces seem sadder as they sustain expression, laughing faces seem happier as the expression continues, smiles broaden, disappear and reappear and as the jerky spaced-out motions continue, the crowd seems to pulse, quiver with life; heads weave and bob like a field of flowers, the loop repeats and repeats, then finally gains a 'normal' momentum before becoming a dizzying vertical tumble like a sliding TV picture, and then fades out.

Rimmer, like Peter Wollen, explores and dissects the substance of film, its actuality and its interreaction with human perception. His work is brilliant and essential; his explorations of the language of film crucial to a real understanding of the medium. In my humble opinion he is one of the most exciting film artists in North America today.

Ice, the next short on the second reel provides a 2½ minute break between the Rimmer films, as Nicholas Kendall's sensitive camera and sound equipment collaborate on a visual and audial study of ice.

Canadian Pacific was made by Rimmer in 1974. The camera is stationary and the view, as in **Real Italian Pizza**, is constant. But everything changes. The frame on the screen is doubled by a line of burglar tape around the window which provides an inner frame (with two intriguing breaks) to the view. Everything is there: sky, clouds, weather, light, water, ships, tugs, freighters, passing trains, passenger and freight, and even, once, a man running. It's a symphony, no, a cantata without the drama. The movements are entirely horizontal, but all of the frame is full of interest to the viewer. The changes in light, angle of the sun, hues and shades resulting from the time of day and type of weather, the foggy veiling of the mountains, colors like a Turner landscape, or a Jim Dine poster, create a constant shift of mood and a reciprocal shift in the audience's reactions. Watching the space and noting the rhythmic dissolves of the trains passing, the slower paced movements of ships, the natural rhythms of days and climate, the viewer is mesmerized by the motions and their rhythms.

A second film, **Canadian Pacific II** has been made by Rimmer of the same view from a block away, two stories higher. It can be run simultaneously with the first on a separate screen for a particularly fascinating echoing ef-



Filmmaker David Rimmer

fect, reinforcing the first and adding another dimension to the view.

Finally, the second reel concludes with **Surface**, another study by Nicholas Kendall. This ten minute examination of water, backed by electronic music, involves abstract water surfaces, and the glistening reality. Little light duns, dancing reflections, tinkly sounds, have a sweet fascination and the bronze globules of rain, the onomatopoeia and the melodic electronic intervals all are attractive too. It's restful but at the end of such a series, something stronger and more precise seems required.

A recommendation one might make for this worthy and enterprising series, is that the films should be titled more clearly, with information concerning for instance, the source of the music, the players and the names of compositions clearly noted. Some few extra words on the production would also be gratefully received, i.e. made at so and so campus, with university equipment and crew, winner of blank and blinkety awards. Might it also be possible to have a little longer leader between films so the effect of one is not wiped out by the opening of the next? More complete notes on who the filmmakers are, what they have done and where they work would also be appreciated.

The Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre in Toronto, which distributes the films at a rental of \$100 for the two reel package, and the National Gallery, whose astute selection committee chooses the program, are to be congratulated for once again making a select group of important short films available across Canada. □

Subscription rates

normal	\$ 8.00
student	7.00
foreign	10.00
institution	15.00

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