

Canadian surrealism in **Thanksgiving** by Ken Wallace. Something akin to André Breton's "shipwreck of the most beautiful reason" infuses this about-face by a turkey that, in Wallace's words, was "pretty raunchy by the third day."

canadian animation

**from annecy
to ottawa**

by Ian Birnie

All film festivals have Olympic overtones – they survive on a blend of nationalism and competition, but the final impact is the result of two variable factors: “product” and locale. In the case of the annual animation festival, the “product” is that severely disciplined and unfashionably uncommercial little strip of film most commonly called the cartoon; and the locale – well, this year, in its first venture outside Europe, it’s Ottawa. Spiritually, that’s about as far from sophisticated Cannes as is Annecy, which snuggling in the French Alps with a propriety that positively eschews hoopla, was the birthplace of a festival that has survived 15 years and is today the leading showcase for international animators. Alternating almost entirely between France and Zagreb since its inception, the festival is regularly attended by the major European animators and critics, with full representation from Japan, North America, and the Soviet-bloc countries.

For its North American debut, Ottawa is the perfect festival town. Home of the National Film Theatre and the Canadian Film Institute, small, scenic and centralized, it will house the screenings and host the delegates in the National Arts Centre, which boasts some of the finest, if least frequently used, projection facilities in Canada. All the major festival activities – in- and out-of-competition screenings, retrospectives, symposiums, press conferences – will take place under one roof, while accommodation for up to 800 has been reserved within walking distance. With almost constant screenings every afternoon and evening, a focused environment of this sort is essential to the intensity of response and the emergence of community feeling that has marked past gatherings. Unreliable distribution facilities (only a handful of the non-North American entries will be seen again in this country), the isolation of many of the animators working in a minority art form (often without big-studio associations) and the dedication of animation buffs, have forged a community that values the European festivals as rallying points for the survival, criticism and proliferation of its art.

Canada has been a regular and highly visible member of that community. At last year’s Annecy Festival, the accepted Canadian submissions numbered 16 films (trailing only the US and France). Not surprisingly, 10 of them were from the National Film Board. This domination of the field by the NFB has its advantages – quality “finished” work, regular employment for animators, ongoing international identification with the art – but it is a mistake to assume that animation in Canada is limited to the NFB. Ironically, it was an independent film, shot in three days in the kitchen of a Vancouver painter/sculptor, that became the controversial film at Annecy last year.

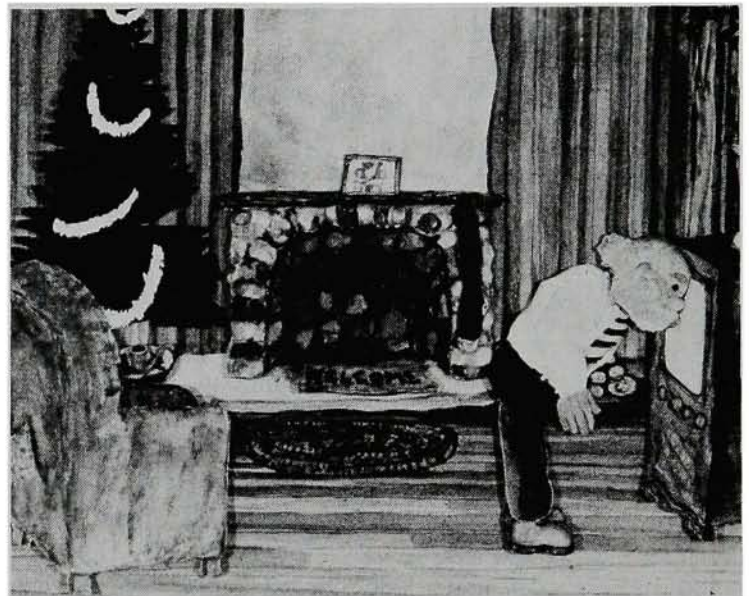
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Annecy audiences aren’t very tolerant. With the characteristic and myopic anarchism of French students, they hooted and ridiculed the childish or sentimental; squadrons of paper airplanes shot forth from the balconies if the film moved too slowly; shouting matches ensued among the aggravated. Gene Deitch, the American animator, charged that they “only respect what’s grotesque” and in at least one instance he was right on: Ken Wallace’s **Thanksgiving** brought down the house.

Wallace’s object-animation of a turkey which escapes from the pan, crawls across the floor and down the steps toward an abrupt demise by hatchet is a one-joke piece of guignol that transcends its subject. Despite a plethora of

“surreal” animation, occupying the spectrum from East European paranoia to finely etched variations on Magritte, **Thanksgiving** was the only film that sat honourably in the tradition of surrealism. Utterly irreverent, it owes much of its impact to its straight-faced incongruity; in particular, its heavy breathing sound and the wax-museum eyes which, lodged either side of the Pope’s nose (Wallace bored holes in the bone), reverse the turkey’s physiognomy in the most alarming way. Wallace is presently working on a more ambitious project, involving an elaborate Birdman structure, and it will be interesting to see if his allegiance to animation develops beyond this grisly hors d’oeuvre.

M. Pointu, the NFB’s offering of hallucinatory objects, takes as its starting point the possible combinations and permutations of a violinist, his instrument, his green bowler hat and his shoe. Enlarging and shrinking in a black vortex, this uncontrolled and uncontrollable universe is rich in startling juxtapositions – at one point, Pointu’s disembodied head flies by; at another, his body is an enlarged self-playing violin – but the film fails in any real appreciation of the absurd or the horrific or the malevolent. The ambivalence toward this world of senseless objects is exemplified by Pointu himself – too benign, too self-conscious in appearance for a film that never assumes normality as a point of reference.



Cut-out animation from the NFB: **Père Noël! Père Noël!** by Pierre Hébert

M. Pointu was shown out-of-competition, and the Canadians present were dutifully outraged. It was head and shoulders above any number of in-competition films – but what the hell? Half the sport of festivals is spotting the gold among the dross. Certainly that feeling emerged from the special program of Quebec animation: frequently crudely conceived and animated, it was nonetheless energetic, full of visual/aural puns, and rousing chansons soundtracks. Several films stood out: **Je suis moi** by Quebec Love, an allegory of Quebec cinema’s domination by foreign interests, and one of the few films at the festival with an overtly political content; **Truck**, in which a toothless goof sings with some feeling about his Big Mac while live-action footage of red and yellow trucks rolls past; **Père Noël! Père Noël!**, Pierre Hébert’s haunting tale of a Christmas eve that brings a shoplifting Santa and his lonely, rural brother together over a case of Labatt’s 50; here again, live-action elements expressively co-exist with the animation – the arrival of Santa by helicopter in Montreal and the shots of workers at the train station on Christmas Day carry a grainy realism that infuse Hébert’s solitary cut-outs with a depth of feeling rare in any animation.

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Sand animation from the NFB: **Le mariage du hibou** by Caroline Leaf

Both **Père Noël** and **Le mariage du hibou** (NFB) – Caroline Leaf's exquisite black-on-white, white-on-black animation in sand of an Eskimo legend that combines the flat plane of Eskimo art with a soundtrack comprised of hunting cries and the eerie rush of beating wings – gave the international audience a greater sense of Canadian identity than the highlighted festival opener **Who Are We?** Written by Don Arioli, whose **Hot Stuff** is one of the best cartoons ever produced by the NFB, this parody of the search for Canadian identity is tired, cliché-ridden, and debilitating. Starting with a gathering of the planets on the occasion of a show on Earth, known informally as Irma, natch, the film moves on to such favourites as beavers, the maple leaf, and mounties. Even some rather droll moments in the revue – e.g., **Swan Rink**, **Snow White and the Group of Seven**, largely due to animator Zlatko Grgic's fine eye for movement – can't compensate for lyrics like:

Who are we, who are we?
Who really gives a damn?
You are you, and he is he
And that is who we am.

Who Are We? could have been a golden opportunity for some sharp satire, but instead suffers from an NFB trait that recently claimed the usually austere Lotte Reiniger as victim: overproduction. Add to this a script that grafts prefabricated situations onto national traits that no one takes seriously anyway, and one has come a long way from John Grierson's earnest dictum for the NFB: "to bring Canada alive to itself; and the rest of the world to its excellences". Let's hope France doesn't open Ottawa 76 with an equally heavy hand.

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What can we expect from an animation festival in Canada? Will it differ from the European festivals?

In one important way it will. The advisory board has decided that no preselection jury will exist; the judging jury will set its own criteria regarding which films will be judged in-competition and which out. In other words, the one jury will see *all* the films (nearly 300 entries are anticipated), not just those preselected by another jury. This measure should, at any rate, remove one bone of contention which inevitably emerges with the tedious task of competitive judgments.

In other respects, Ottawa 76, under the administration and direction of Frederik Manter and Wayne Clarkson of the CFI, has acted fast and against a shortage of time to

ensure all the components of the classic festival. A logo and opening trailer has been designed by Radio Canada. Four retrospective programs have been organized in addition to the competitive screenings: an Oskar Fischinger Retrospective, which will include several films never before publicly screened, and will be attended by Fischinger's widow; a retrospective of films by the Quebecois animator and painter, Raoul Barré, who died in Montreal in 1932 after 25 years of work in New York City (six of them at his own studio); a Retrospective of Cut-out Animation which will focus on that technique in a dozen films dating from 1906 to the present; a retrospective of National Film Board animation since the department's inception in 1941. Midnight screenings of feature-length animation and a possible program of stereoscopic – 3D! – animation should top off a festival which the recent CFI communique, eschewing modesty, hails as "one of the best ever".

But the real opportunity of the festival lies not only in the retrospectives, nor even the competitions; it rests more generally with the chance for large numbers of North American animators to meet and evaluate their peers, to share in the same community that has flourished in Europe. For example, an animation workshop, organized by animator Co Hoedeman (co-sponsored by the NFB and ASIFA Canada – our Montreal-based branch of this international society of animators) will be held concurrently at the University of Ottawa. Aimed at students who, without fee, are provided with 16 mm, super-8, and video equipment, the workshop represents a first step toward broadening the scope of festival week, and a welcome de-emphasis of the more passive film-viewing role.

The festival should further represent a point of focus for the problems of subsidy and distribution, particularly as they affect independent animators. The Art Gallery of Ontario recently surveyed a dozen Canadian independents about existing and alternative means of financing, distributing, and viewing animation. John Straiton's ironic reply echoed general sentiments: "What financing, distribution, viewing?" Still, many responses focused on tying animated shorts to features in commercial cinemas, distribution of independent work through the existing outlets of the NFB, increased programming of films by the CBC, and expansion of library/museum collections.

The answers reveal a far-from-surprising ambivalence: an aggressive demand for commercial outlets and marketplace status combined with a defensive reiteration of government subsidy. Toronto animator John Leach put it bluntly: "It's a supply and demand situation. When animation can compete with Jack Nicholson and Liz Taylor at the box office, it'll be a whole new ball game." Well, yes and no. The fact remains: an aware response from "outside" – from commercial cinema and television – can make an essential contribution to animators. The enlarged resources can both stabilize the artist and liberate the art. An animation community, the forging of a regular North American festival is a desirable thing; but an animation ghetto is not.

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All festivals produce metaphors; they flutter afterward from the journalistic pen like butterflies. Last year at Annecy, it was toilets, birds, and **Le pas** – the grand prize winner which articulated the slicing away of one cube into paper-thin leaves which fell to build up another absolutely identical cube – classical, neutral, cold, irrelevant; a technique in search of a subject.

Few festivals produce issues. Annecy sidestepped the brutal misogyny that surfaced in at least seven films, the inherent racism of Ralph Bakshi's **Coonskin**, and the dubious political allegories of several children's films. If Ottawa has a chance to be different, it lies in taking a tougher look at animation: at its mythical substructure, at its modernist tendencies, at its unlimited potential. □