

# a crash course in film technique

a selective guide  
to the NFB catalogue

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For those who want to see more, to listen better, and to understand the techniques of filming, Ron Blumer offers a starting point: his do-it-yourself course, using free films from the National Film Board.

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by Ronald H. Blumer



Norman Jewison on location shooting *Fiddler on the Roof* from the NFB movie *Norman Jewison, Filmmaker*



It doesn't take much of a genius to realize that the best way to teach people how films are made is to show them films, lots of them. The trouble is that films are expensive to rent and often, in order to make some point about editing or camerawork, you are interested in only a short excerpt. For two years now I have been teaching film esthetics at the junior college level to a mixed bag of students. I give a nuts-and-bolts course in an effort to show them, first, that films are in fact made and don't somehow appear on the screen by magic and, second, some of the elements that go into their making. A large part of my course makes use of films produced by the National Film Board, not only because they are free (although when you require five or six films per class, this certainly is an important consideration) but also because the NFB catalogue is a gold mine of material covering just about every aspect of filmmaking. With its hundreds of films exhibiting a wealth of subjects and techniques, the NFB can be regarded as a vast, traveling national cinema school and anyone teaching film or media is a fool not to make full use of it.

My introductory course divides the study of film into lectures dealing with camera, sound, editing, structuring and special effects. What follows is a listing of some of the best NFB films I have found to deal with each of these particular areas. Obviously other films could have been selected, and their selection does not even mean that they are particularly good films. I use them as tools and they have proved valuable in trying get hold of this most elusive of mediums.

## Camera

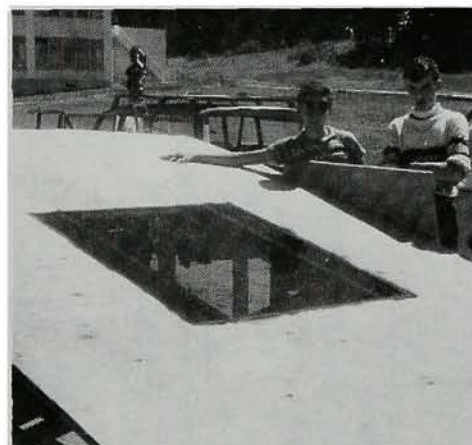
**60 Cycles**, a 16-minute film directed by cameraman Jean-Claude Labrecque, is an excellent introduction to the art of the camera. The film is without narration and documents a 1,500-mile bicycle race which used to take place across Quebec. This is unquestionably a cameraman's film; Labrecque uses every lens in the kit, every camera angle and camera movement to capture the strain and tension of the race. The film begins with a spectacular telephoto shot of

the approaching cyclists. The compression effect is so extreme they seem not to be moving at all. From then on the camera goes into helicopters, holes in the ground, tracking, panning, tilting shots and at one point even joins the race with a camera somehow mounted on a bicycle. Watching this film several times, you come up with a powerful teaching tool; a virtual encyclopedia of camera technique.

**The Wish**, a 27-minute film by director-cameraman Martin Duckworth, is among the most beautiful films



**60 Cycles**: an encyclopedia of camera technique



**60 Cycles**: to get a low angle shot such that the cyclists appear to be flying through the air, Labrecque constructs a ramp with a glass window, below which is the camera

ever made at the board. In terms of style, it is very different from the technical virtuosity of **60 Cycles**. No fancy lenses here, no helicopter shots; in fact the entire film stays very much on the ground with a hand-held camera and a standard zoom lens. The film is about Duckworth's eight-year-old twin daughters and their exploration of the world around them, particularly their grandparents. Like other personal films, such as **Neil & Fred** and **Coming Home**, the fact that the filmmaker is filming his own family results in an intimacy not usually possible in most documentaries. In terms of the camerawork, we are not outside looking in, but fluidly, movingly part of the young girls' lives. This is a difficult film to approach from a technical point of view, but if you are able to distance yourself from its captivating content, you will see the flawless compositions, the impressive camera movements and an amazing eye for light and shapes which characterize all of Duckworth's camera work.

## Sound

Most conventional theatrical dramatic films make very predictable use of sound, using mainly dialogue and music. Documentary films often use sound very imaginatively, and hidden in the NFB catalogue are a few masterpieces.

**Pollu-sons** (14 minutes, black & white) is one of those NFB films which exist in a sort of limbo. Although listed in the catalogue, it is very difficult to get hold of. Supposedly a French film, although its language makes very little difference, the film is not even available in the Montreal regional office, so good luck in Moose Jaw. The film, made by soundman Claude Hazanavicius, is rather dull as a film but brilliant as a teaching tool. It consists of a simple visual sequence of a man walking to a farmhouse, entering, writing a letter and going out to mail it. This sequence is repeated four times in the film, each time accompanied by totally different sound tracks consisting of music, synchronous sound, sound effects and poetic narration. Naturally, the nature and meaning of the image is totally changed by the different sound tracks, which of course is the object of the exercise.

**Jour apres jour** (also available in a less-satisfying English version **Day After Day**, 30 minutes, B & W) was directed by Clément Perron, who among other things wrote **Mon Oncle Antoine**, and is about the monotony of life in a town dominated by a paper

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factory. It has one of the most astounding sound tracks which I have ever experienced in a film. There is no conventional music or narration in the movie; it is a visual, acoustical tone poem which works more on the level of abstraction and rhythm than on standard documentary information. The sound track consists of orchestrated sound effects, musique concrete coupled with a woman's voice alternating quotes from the Bible with dull repetitive statistics of the town. "Thou shalt not kill... thou shalt pay income tax and union dues... but the machine said..." It is a film which uses its techniques not in an arty, irrelevant way, but unified with its subject matter to produce a powerful and lasting effect.

## Editing

Editing is difficult to teach because if done well, editing is not something that you are aware of in a film. The best way to learn editing (aside from having people actually do it) is to look at a film in a viewer going backwards and forwards over the cut points to see how the cutting works. In teaching a class, a projector with good motion control is essential. Most go into reverse fairly easily, many allow you to project a single frame at time without burning a hole in the film. There are any number of National Film Board films which can be used to teach editing; here are two.

**Corral** (12 minutes, B & W) was Colin Low's first film - he has since produced and directed dozens. **Corral** is an extremely simple film about a cowboy selecting a wild horse from the herd and making his first attempts to saddle and ride it. It is an almost perfectly structured film with a clear beginning, middle, climax and ending and it relies entirely on the visuals to tell its story. Because of this simplicity, it serves as an ideal introduction to the art of editing. Students have found it a valuable experience to take this film and analyze it shot by shot on a viewer. They see how even the simplest of films relies on many shots to tell a story and how these different shots are combined together to produce different effects.

A second film gives a very curious introduction to the art of film editing. **Descent** (30 minutes, color) is a film about Canada's National Ski Team and was directed by Gilles Walker and edited by John Laing. The film is interesting in terms of editing because of one particular scene, the climactic race against the clock by David Murray, one of Canada's most promising



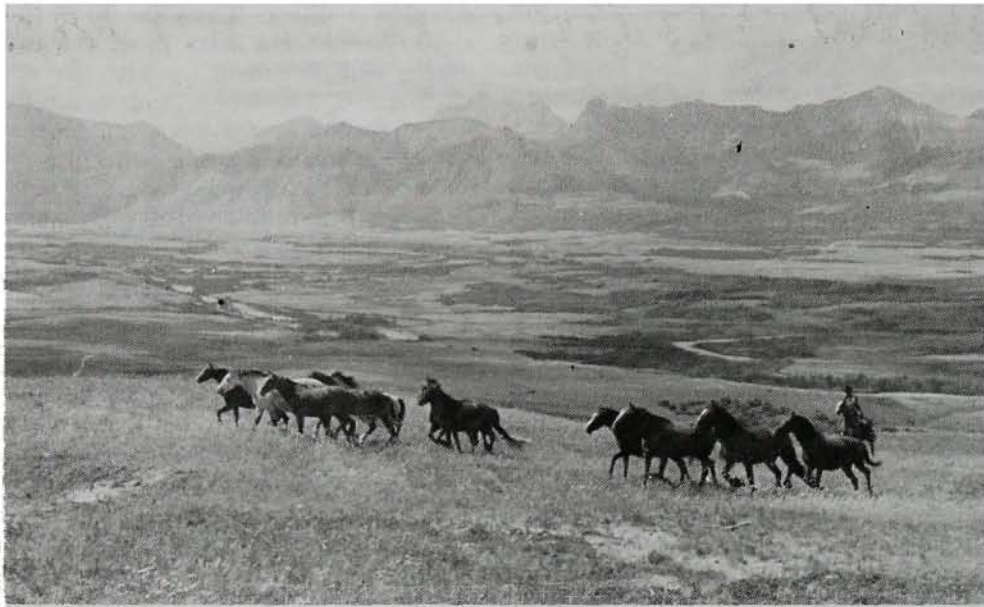
Resynthesizing reality: in **Descent**, skier David Murray's changing numbers give a key to the art of editing

downhill skiers. The film must be shown twice. The first time, the audience will be caught up with the excitement of the event and naturally look upon the final event as a continuity. The second time the film is shown, ask the audience to particularly notice the number Murray is wearing. To their amazement they will see that it changes from shot to shot in this apparently continuous race. This film, like many others, was an amalgam of a great deal of footage. The final race sequence is the result of shots from many races taken around the world and edited on motion into one smooth-flowing continuity. Once this key is noticed, the creative work of the editing becomes visible as does the whole creative role of the editor in terms of resynthesizing reality. The magic of film is such, however, that even when the number changes are noticed, the sequence still works and still flows smoothly.

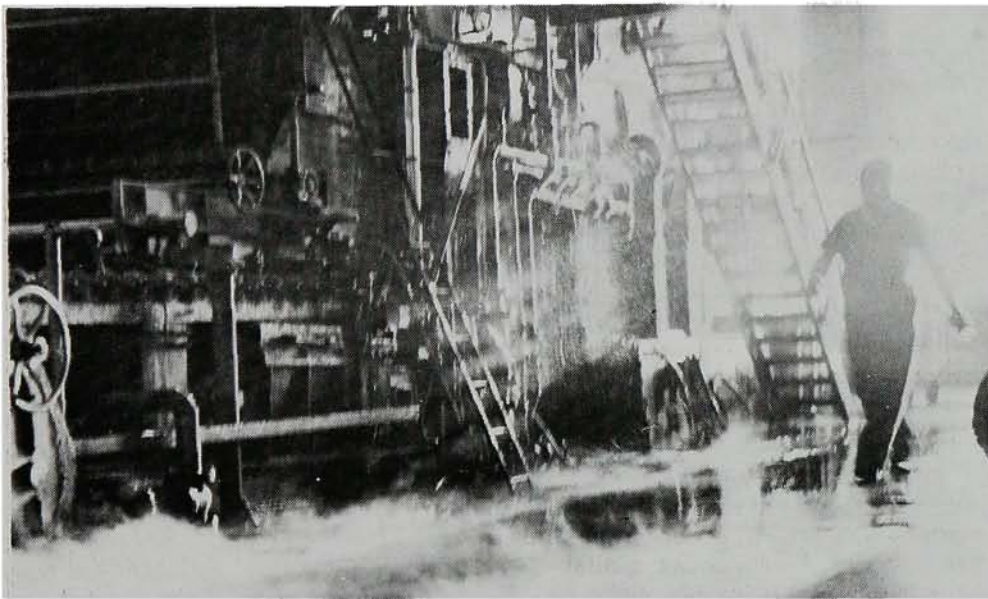
## Structuring

Somewhere between editing and the final film comes a process very familiar to all filmmakers, that of pacing the film, arranging the edited

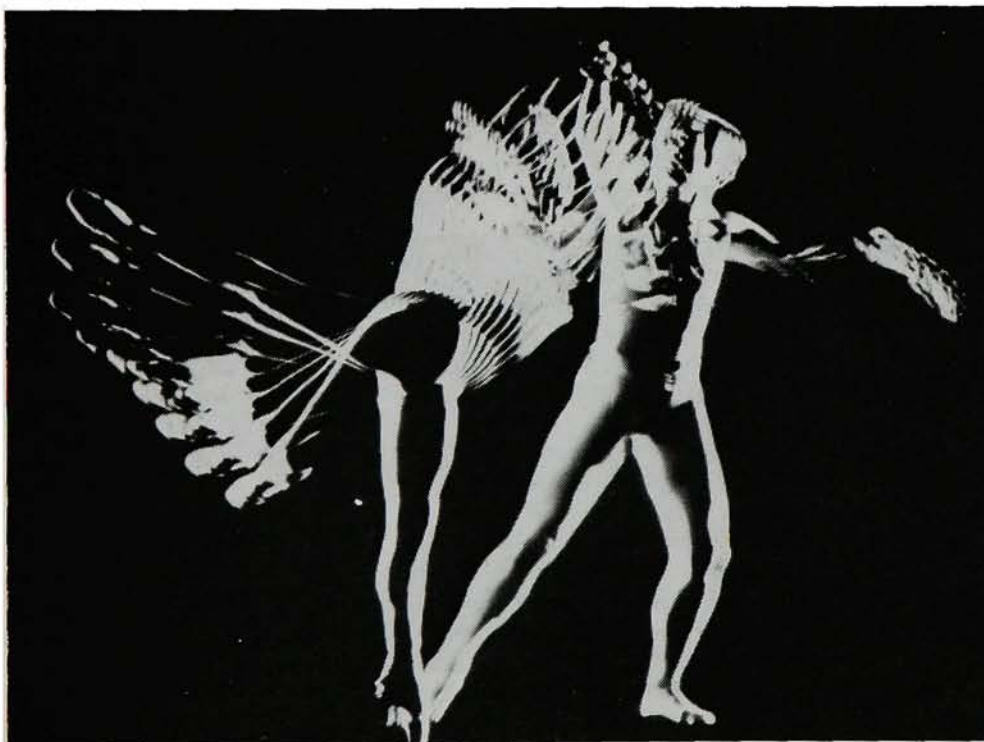




**Corral:** splicing and structuring on the Canadian prairie



**Jour après jour:** a visual-acoustic tone poem



**Pas de deux:** dance and the optical camera

sequences in a such an order that the final film will grab and involve the audience. Strangely enough this is an element of film esthetics rarely mentioned in film literature and yet it is the one step that most clearly makes or breaks a film. In looking at the structuring of a film, one examines it almost like a piece of music detailing its various build-ups, climax points and rest points. All films can be graphed in this particular way but for teaching purposes, it is wise to use simple and straightforward short films. **Corral** is again ideal in this respect but other films that can be looked at in this way are **Judoka** (18 minutes, B & W) a film about a Canadian judo champion in Japan and **Nahanni** (18 minutes, color) a short, very gripping film about an old prospector's tireless search for gold. All three of these films have clear strong structures which contribute very directly their final effect. Finally, not to be overlooked in this connection is Arthur Lipsett's **Trip Down Memory Lane** (13 minutes, B & W) a collection of stock shot sequences which works purely on the level of structure and editing. The film is strange, gripping and moving, without making the least bit of sense.

### Special Effects

The National Film Board is big on special effects and almost every type has appeared in one or another of their films. **Volleyball** (10 minutes, B & W) makes very effective use of the technique of freeze framing and repeat frame printing (to give a slow motion-like effect) as well as actual slow motion to study the movement of several teams of professional volleyball players. **Sky** (10 minutes, color) uses time-lapse photography to show rapidly moving sunrises and sunsets as well as a marvelous ballet of moving cloud formations. Pixilation, the frame by frame animating of static objects, is well demonstrated in many of Norman McLaren's films. **A Chairy Tale** (10 minutes, B & W) has a youthful Claude Jutra doing battle with a chair that refuses to be sat upon. Someone is skating on the back lawn in **Two Bagatelles** (2 minutes, color) using this same technique. **Pas de deux** (13 minutes, color), a dance film by McLaren, shows with great beauty what you can do with multiple superimpositions in the optical camera. Finally films like **Carrousel** and **Angel** (both 8 minutes) are exercises in the photographic color shifting of ordinary images. While the impor-





Two Bagatelles: pixilation in the backyard

tance of special effects should not be exaggerated in terms of everyday use, it is interesting to show these films in a classroom situation because many of these effects can be duplicated using simple Super 8 equipment.

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This has been a brief examination of how NFB films can be used to teach film techniques. If one chooses to approach the area in terms of film genres, the catalogue also has excellent examples not only of all styles of documentary, but also a variety of animation, experimental films and even a few stabs at drama. There are several films about film in the catalogue. **Self-Portrait** is a very poor historical look at the National Film Board itself using clips of typical productions. It comes in five thirty-minute parts and is primarily interesting for Part One, which gives us a glimpse into the fabulous and as yet untold story of the NFB's wartime propaganda films. The film **Grierson** (one hour, color) and Susan Schouten's series on Grierson's documentary philosophy both contain valuable material for those studying film. Finally, as a general turn-on to film, **Norman Jewison, Filmmaker** (50 minutes, color) by Doug Jackson provides a fascinating look not only at the filmmaker but at the headaches and glory of shooting a major feature production.

The films I have been talking about are obviously just a suggested starting point. The catalogue has over 900 other titles, many of which can be put to similar purposes. Most people are forced to try and learn about film from textbooks simply because the possibility of learning about film using films is much too costly. In the United States, National Film Board films appear in the catalogues of all the major educational distributors; in many cases they are the jewels of the collection and command high rental fees. In Canada we are in a unique position; we are all enrolled in a government-financed film school and the great thing is that the tuition is free. □

## HOW TO GET THE FILMS

Like Alberta's oil or Quebec's hydroelectric power, the National Film Board and its library of about 1,000 films can be looked on as a natural resource. In no other country in the world can educational institutions and even private groups get such a wealth of film material free. Oh, I know it's not really free; we all pay for old Ma NFB with all her blunderings and inefficiencies out of our tax dollars – which is precisely why we should make use of the place. Hidden among the inadequate descriptions in the hard-to-get 180-page catalogue are a few excellent films, but how do you know which ones they are? And how do you get them?

NFB films are poorly publicized and tricky to get hold of, for the simple reason that, being free, they cost money each time they go out and each time they come back. In the private sector it is rewarding to go out and sell your films but at the NFB you save the Canadian taxpayer money by letting the films sit on the shelf. The people at the board explain that since there is only so much money for distribution, there is only so much distribution. It isn't only a question of money, however; it's a question of commitment – and commitment is something in very short supply in an old and tired bureaucracy. It often seems more than they can handle just to take care of the unsolicited business which happens to fall in the front door.

Technically, all NFB titles are available in all the regional offices and, through the regional offices, to all NFB offices across Canada. At these offices, you or your group must apply for a green plastic card which entitles you to take out films. The films are selected from the catalogue and ordered by code number *no more than* two months ahead of time and *no less than* one week ahead of time. Therein begins the roulette game. A great number of films listed in the catalogue and the newer releases simply aren't there. Either there is no print available in your region or, more frequently, not enough prints of films in great demand.

Even after a booking has been confirmed, screwups are frequent and you may find yourself with an audience and no film, or no reel three, or a print in such bad condition that it won't run through the projector. In short, if you are really counting on getting a particular film on a particular date, there is much reason for worry.

There are alternatives, however. One is to buy the prints yourself, particularly if you intend to use certain films year after year. They are cheap (about \$10 per minute for color films, half that price for black and white), educational discounts are available, and if you choose your films carefully, several departments can make use of them. Another alternative is to approach local libraries and universities, many of which have collections of NFB films and will rent them to you at a nominal fee. The saving in worry and headache is well worth the money.

The remaining problem is what films to get. The 100-word description in the catalogue and the fact that it won the Golden Anchovy Award in 1953 does not help you very much. There are, for example, over 100 films listed on the subject of Canadian history. Some are excellent and some are dogs and the catalogue does not tell you which is which. The NFB representative may possibly be helpful and may also be unapproachable and/or clueless about the films. Previewing is really the only way of judging what a film is worth to you but this can be very time-consuming.

One would think that if an organization were to spend \$50,000 to \$100,000 on a film, they could afford to produce a small booklet containing background to the film, a detailed description of its content and approach and information about the filmmaker and participants in the film. With rare exceptions, such data is not even available to the press and aside from a poorly written, one-page publicity sheet there is simply no information available to the prospective user on what the film is about.

At the very least, all NFB films should be rated by independent bodies actually using the film; rated in terms of both style and content. In the United States, organizations such as the Educational Film Library Association (EFLA) regularly evaluate documentaries in this way, and you will find many NFB films popping up on their lists. The fact that the National Film Board doesn't organize something equivalent to this in Canada for all their new releases, if only for their *own* edification, is a poignant testimony to everything that is wrong with the place. □