
The National Film Board of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario have combined forces to organize three programs of short, independent Canadian films. These programs are distributed by the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. Ian Birnie, Tony Reif and Jean-Pierre Bastien share their ideas about independent production in Canada as reflected by these programs.

independent views

by Ian Birnie, Tony Reif
and Jean-Pierre Bastien



Je Suis Moi by Quebec Love: trying to get the message across

In February of 1977, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Film Board developed three programs devoted to Canadian independent filmmaking, which will be available through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre for screenings nationally this fall. The films were selected by a jury comprised of Tony Reif of the Pacific Cinematheque (Vancouver), Jean-Pierre Bastien of La Cinémathèque Québécoise (Montreal), Doug Eliuk of the National Film Board, Toronto, and myself, Ian Birnie of the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto). Our objective was to select good films which were representative of our particular regional areas, and to build programs broad enough to reflect the national production of independent shorts, documentaries and animation – from the avant-garde to the quasi-commercial. The final programs are not definitive, nor should they be. If they work beyond the merits of the individual films, they will serve to indicate the immense diversity, accomplishment and potential of filmmaking in this country.

Good independent filmmaking is frequently provincial in the best sense of the word – the films, by nature of their personal focus and limited enterprise, reflect the environment of the filmmaker. Certainly, one is struck by the different “looks” of the major film areas in Canada: if the West Coast films seem (literally) flooded with mountains and sea and Orientalism, Ontario is in contrast resolutely urban, its familial presence reflected in middle-class living rooms of the southern sprawl. By turn, Quebec films contrast an urban milieu unique in its grimy realism, to a rural heritage depicted with an almost anthropological attention to detail.

Seen as a whole, the several hundred films considered for the program revealed any number of accomplished shorts from three to 30 minutes in length, but the location of a vitally self-conscious national community of independent filmmakers became more elusive with each screening, each new name. So many films begin well and trail off, out of ideas or techniques or money; so many filmmakers make one film, then graduate, or change their jobs, or make a second film that seems to close off more possibilities than it opens up. The number of independents who are using film as an ongoing means for developing their ideas about cinema, who are defining themselves, in progressively sophisticated terms, as artists, has not increased significantly in 10 years.

What elements contribute to an independent’s sense of self-identity? Is money a factor? Tess Taconis, Executive Director of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, believes the funding agencies have not kept pace with the rising lab costs – making it increasingly difficult to finish a film once begun, or even to conceive one. This is combined with, and undoubtedly contributes to, a growing interest on the part of the filmmaker in selling his film. “Young filmmakers come here right out of universities or community colleges, clutching their films, and the first question is: ‘Will it sell? What kind of films sell?’ There’s no status in being an independent.”

Times change. For those of us who can remember waving away the moths to catch a glimpse of some new West Coast film at an outdoor screening on Toronto’s Markham Street, or crowding into a basement room at the Art Gallery of Ontario to ‘discover’ Maya Deren, the do-your-own-thing ‘60s seemed to promise that such alternate ways of seeing were cultural discoveries to be respected, and to be built upon. In 1969, Michael Snow could consider a “regular-hours” screening of **Wavelength** at a commercial cinema on Yonge

Street, no one appearing more surprised than himself at this possibility “to break the stranglehold system that only films of certain kinds, from certain sources, and of certain lengths, can be presented in ordinary cinemas.” Eight years later, Snow’s **Rameau’s Nephew** has played a handful of times across the country. A new kind of status.

A Canadian independent film community can prosper but beyond money, it requires three things. It needs more outlets for the viewing of films. This means not only more galleries and community centres, but more universities and high schools. Films should be bought and they should be screened more than once. At present, according to the CFDC, only two universities in Ontario buy independent films, and only a few more rent them – a situation almost totally dependent on individual staff interest, thus subject to the vagaries of hiring.

Films should be written about and discussed. A critical community has been instrumental in establishing virtually all the major film movements we know. There are a lot of ideas to be shared, and a lot of traps to be avoided. We do not need to develop a ‘salon mentality’ or write a history. What we need to do is identify creative work, applaud style and visual finesse, and encourage an audience both for our own independents and those from other countries.

We must broaden our awareness of the best work in avant-garde filmmaking, both historic and contemporary. This has been the option and the profit of virtually every other artist in this country. The paucity of film from abroad, the limited facilities for hosting workshops, seminars and retrospectives of internationally acclaimed work, is a disgrace that should be corrected.

What Canada needs, and needs to value, are filmmakers with independent views. This can’t be legislated and if the filmmakers don’t cherish their unique perceptions, the government certainly won’t. If independents can’t prove an identity distinct from commercial channels of thought and production, the industry won’t provide it. Independents must demand status because they don’t fit in and because they won’t be co-opted.

“Art feeds on margins” wrote Jonas Mekas in 1960. The independent filmmakers in Canada should begin immediately to take a hard look at their culture, and the films they are making from it and bringing to it. They should take their art and think it through. If they don’t, their independent views won’t be worth the film they’re printed on.

Ian Birnie

Notes From Pacifica

Independent filmmaking in Vancouver has often been inspired by the physical reality of mountains, sea and rain-forest, by the technical example of California experimentation (Scott Bartlett, Bruce Conner, Pat O’Neill), by the relation to the Far East (a concern with Buddhism in various forms). Yet these sources do not quite predict the cultural mix which results in the Vancouver ‘school’, because they do not take into account the individual genius of a Byron Black, Al Razutis, David Rimmer, nor the insularity whereby influences are absorbed from time to time rather than continuously, and a unique offshoot develops a little to the side of any recognized mainstream.

One way of getting an overview, at least conceptually, of much of Vancouver film is to consider it as an exploration of masks – personality masks, the formal masks or layers

Ian Birnie works at the Art Gallery of Ontario and was instrumental in organizing “Independent Views.” With the help of Tony Reif from the Pacific Cinematheque and Jean-Pierre Bastien from the Cinémathèque Québécoise, he put together the program notes from which our article is taken.

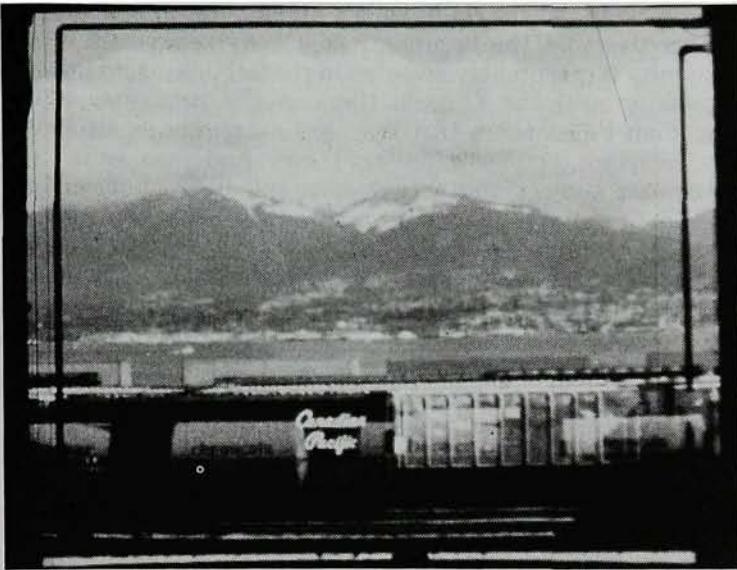
Independent Filmmaking in Ontario

Arriving at a definition of Ontario filmmaking involves the location and analysis of an identity crisis – a crisis largely on the part of the analyst and rarely, if ever, on the part of the subject. Are we, as Ontarians, quintessentially deferential, even evasive, about imposing a characteristic mien to our independent cinema? Is it even fair to expect that a prolific decade of filmmaking, dispersed as it is among single efforts and isolated careers, would provoke a clear line of distinguishing features?

Our critics have an easier time: technically limited, enervated, mundane, grey... why go on? To our credit, there is no shortage of replies. A visually elegant, witty film like Joyce Wieland's **Catfood** caused critic Manny Farber to evoke Manet in the face of her silver, white and red composition. Two films as different as **Spinning** (Wyn Wise and Richard Shoichet) and **Sonauto** (John Bertram), draw a large measure of their effect from a careful attention to visual tone: the former's inky black field in which the spinner spins, the hard day-glow flashes of color through which the latter drives. Who could fail to notice the acute sense of design in Kim Ondaatje's **Patchwork Quilts**, or the rich flush from sepia to color at the beginning of Deepa Saltzman's **At 99**. Lorne Marin's sensitive and complex use of superimposition in **Second Impressions** is, in a minor key, as integral a marriage of technology to meaning as is the exhilarating virtuosity of Michael Snow's three-dimensional landscape film **La région centrale**.

Still, it must be admitted that color and technique are *not*, on the whole, the characteristic attributes of Ontario filmmaking. It is more accurate to point to the modesty of our filmmaking – to its home-made qualities. Critic Bob Fothergill observed that in the early independent features of commercial filmmakers like Don Owen, Don Shebib, and Clarke Mackey, the same concentration on routine actions, and "flat daylight realism" gave rise to the same objections. Looked at now, these films are powerful precisely because they do not depend upon outsized personalities or kinaesthetic editing for their impact. They take their feel and their look from the ordinary lives they chronicle.

Ontario films deal with what is at hand, and they do so directly and rather purposefully. The extravagant camera movement that marks Snow's **Wavelength**, for example, or **Yonge Street** (Jim Anderson), or even **House Movie** (Rick Hancox), is not so much lyric as deterministic; the camera, though curious, has somewhere to go, and is content to move forward without prejudice to the reality beyond its own set course. This sense of being in a world in which the familiar exists to be rediscovered and re-experienced, comes through in the best of these "home movies" – virtually an Ontario genre. Films like Hancox's **House Movie** and Lorne Marin's **Second Impressions** "permanently deepen commonplace, immediate experiences" and define a concept of home in purely subjective terms. Greg Curnoe and Keith Lock – to choose two examples from many – have made interesting films directly involving their friends: the former's **Souwesto** details London, Ontario, in a progression of personal events from 1947 - 1969; the latter's **Everything Everywhere Again Alive**, in which communal life in Northern Ontario is caught in a succession of documentary fragments. **She is Away** by Bruce Elder, evokes absence through elliptical continuity and loneliness through the repetition of several archetypal images.



A scene from David Rimmer's **Canadian Pacific**

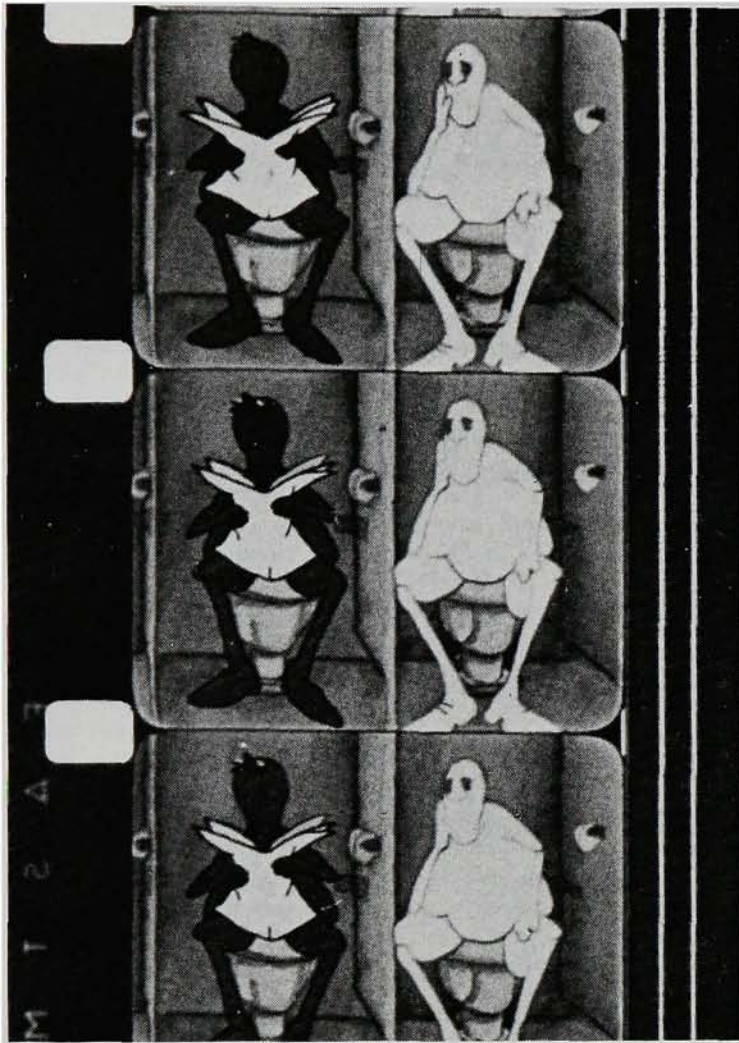
(often involving elaborate optical printing and/or collage) which can represent or express levels of reality/illusion – and an approach to consciousness beyond masks, some way to evoke through the formal a sense of the formless and timeless.

David Rimmer, Ellie Epp in **Trapline** and Gordon Kidd in **Olympus** gain this state through a stripping-down of expression, a serenity of form in which the aesthetic parameters are classically cool, often rhythmically repetitive. (As Robert Fothergill wrote about Rimmer, "taking some scrap of a recorded action, he distills it to an abstract pattern then slowly allows its contents to seep back in like an epiphany.") Al Razutis often begins with a reduced imagery but builds it up through variation into baroque edifices. Richard Patton, Byron Black and Chris Gallagher usually start at the other end, with exuberant overloads of various imagery – often centering around the concept of performance – that burst through finally to some core of meaning or feeling.

In Byron Black's case, performance is more than a filmic metaphor, more like a way of being. Apart from a few completed films that are meant to stand on their own (e.g. the features **Master of Images** and **Holy Assassin**, the short **Om Man Ni Pad Me Hum**), his work is presented in person. Film on the screen is an element around which he improvises wild, pun-filled routines, cosmic comedies that veer between dada and didacticism according to the shifting dynamics of psychic energy, mixed media aesthetics and audience response. Here and in Patton's **Night of Samhain**, performance is celebrated as the expression of energy at play at the moment. Al Sens' cartooning has similar qualities.

In the area of documentary, a major concern of the last few years has been the situation of B.C.'s native people. Dennis Wheller's **Potlatch** deals with the history of cultural suppression and reconstruction, while Jan Martell's **A Little While More Yet** is a personal statement by a young Vancouver Island Indian about his perception of white culture and his people's inability to work with its basic assumptions, its tempo. Another film both diary and documentary is Patton's **Island Journal**, a selection of impressions of the Gulf Islands which, in its rambling, obliquely associative structure, embodies the fabled laid-back rhythm of west coast life in concrete and uncliché terms. As in **Night of Samhain**, the line between the incidental and the sententious, direction and idleness, the put-on and the mystery, is never too clear.

Tony Reif



The pause that inspires in *Da-da-da*

Both Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow have built bodies of highly formal cinema from the stuff of home movies: the "kitchen table/sink" in *Table-Top Dolly*, *Dripping Water*, *Catfood*, *Watersark*, and parts of *Rameau's Nephew*; or the "painter's studio" in *Wavelength* and *A Casing Shelved*.

Some of the best Ontario documentaries – *Patchwork Quilts*, *Lyle Leffler*, *Last of the Medicine Men*, *At 99: A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch*, and *Campaign*, Robert Fothergill's excellent film on winning and losing in a Toronto election – qualify as home movies for their emphasis on the communal and the familial. Ultimately a bit dull, they are films that succeed without challenge to the social milieu and middle-class assumptions of their subjects. Despite an intriguing handful of films, Ontario filmmakers who attempt a critique of their culture often as not emerge ambivalent and self-conscious. In *My Friend Vince*, filmmaker David Rothberg's aggressive comradery with a petty thief fails to bridge the gulf with little more than shop talk and ego, while Richard Rowberry's interview with his parents in *The Three of Us*, seems determined to provoke a generation gap that just won't emerge. Attempts to deal with the ironies of Italian immigrant life in Toronto have not succeeded from within or without: Peter Rowe's *Good Friday in Little Italy* makes some points through editing but his juxtapositions of billiard halls and religious pageants is no surprise to a culture clearly thriving on contradictions. *Franco* – Salvatore Greco's ambitious Italian-language short fiction film provides a successful dramatization of the conflicts within a New Canadian home, but fails to give their resolution any social or psychological impact.

The manner in which the filmmaker's own unresolved conflicts can overwhelm a film is exemplified by a film like

Cream Soda, where Holly Dale's hidden voyeuristic camera further degrades the occupants of a body rub parlor whose humanity is presumably revealed in the unblinking process.

Looking over the Ontario films in the catalogue of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, one is struck by the recurrent emphasis on what Jim Anderson calls "the immediate subject matter". Despite the abstract terminology and the musical analogies, one returns to a cinema that takes its environment at face value. This fundamental aspect of Ontario filmmaking emerges directly in films which attempt to heighten the physical world without betraying it. Dave Anderson catches some of the inherent irony in his own description of *Big Wave* as an "unashamedly lyrical look at a plastic tarpaulin covering a vast saltpile" while Neal Livingston's *Aura-Gone*, a single shot of the reflections in the glass facade of a hospital, draws a quote from critic Natalie Edwards – "reminiscent of being left waiting in the car when one was a child" – that may be the essence of Ontario pragmatism and the *sine qua non* of the 'home movie'.

Ian Birnie

The Steady Path of Continuity

Continuity.

I have not stopped thinking of continuity since taking part in the selection committee for the films which make up this program.

Continuity. The film industry keeps going its merry way, film biz is indeed becoming an industry and movies are turning into mere consumer products.

Continuity. Authentic creators of films are finding it ever more difficult to make movies, even within the hallowed walls of Canadian film production (the National Film Board).

Continuity. The federal government announces new fiscal exemptions which, pushed to the limit, are turning Canada into a haven of co-production. The logical conclusion becomes a Franco-Quebec film entitled *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane*, filmed in English in the heart of French Canada.

Continuity. Yesterday's moviemakers are not quite so young as they were but they still go after the same things: David Rimmer and Jean-Guy Noël remain faithful to their initial intent. Yet there are widely differing paths. It is as true for movie-making in the West as it is in Quebec. From sea to sea (since such is the purpose of the federal program: to bring to people the cinema from each side of this continent, not to make one cinema out of several regional ones) one moves from one style to another totally different style.

In reality, the young film craftsmen have as much difficulty in raising funds for their projects in Vancouver as they do in Rouyn or in Hauterive. They make their movies under similar conditions and they never enjoy the authentic chance of proving their worth as filmmakers.

But this artistic solitude is the only link between their respective works. So it should come as no surprise that the only common points between filmmakers in the East and those in the West are common technical points. All have to live every day by the strictures of an economic system which proceeds by Darwinian selection.

Since such is the case...

Film production – whether professional or independent – fairly accurately reflects the concerns of its creators. Every film conveys directly social, political, economic and cultural determinisms which are the product of the society in which these films are created.

One thing I find quite reassuring, nowadays, in Quebec's independent filmmaking; the young people have stopped dreaming about vast and romantic films, featuring the comeliest stars and shot with the largest cameras. They want to make films which relate to people; they want to film life; they want to make the very daily business of living the topic of their work. Although there is still a lot of probing and hesitation, you can feel the orientation all the same.

In that respect, Quebec filmmakers can only be inspired by the heroic struggle started some twenty years ago by

such people as Brault, Groulx, Jutra and others, a struggle which made the first breach in the wall of tradition and constitutes the true beginnings of Quebec filmmaking. Besides, in fighting against hostile elements within the NFB, these pioneers were forced to act as craftsmen. It is easy to forget that Brault, Groulx and Carrière, as they filmed **Les raquetteurs**, fought a battle well worth keeping in mind today. For this was not a battle about a single film. It was a battle aimed at changing the rules of film production.

What is more encouraging is that the young Quebec filmmakers have taken to the more vigorous tradition of Quebec cinema. If they are given the time and the means, they may be one day the pillars of a cinema which will bear witness to a society in transformation.

Jean-Pierre Bastien

Independent Views

Three Programs of Short Canadian Independent Films*

Program I (94-½ minutes)

1. **Life Times Nine** (1973, 14 min., color)
Produced by Insight Films
2. **Le scrapeur** (1976, 20 min., b&w, French)
by Bruno Carrière
3. **Logo & Je suis moi** (1973, 6-1/2 min., color, French)
designed and animated by Quebec Love
4. **Sosoon** (1974, 8 min., b&w)
Computer animation by Georges Singer
5. **Fracture** (1973, 11 min., color, silent)
by David Rimmer
6. **Bridal Shower** (1971, 23 min., color)
by Sandy Wilson
7. **Thought** (1976, 4 min., b&w)
Animated by Darcia Labrosse
8. **Revisited** (1974, 8 min., color)
by Joyce Borenstein

Program II (9-3 minutes)

1. **Second Impressions** (1975, 9 min., color)
by Lorne Marin
2. **Wild Sync** (1972-3, 11 min., color)
by Rick Hancox
3. **Standard Time** (1967, 8 min., color)
by Michael Snow
4. **How the Hell Are You?** (1972, 12 min., color)
Anim. Veronika Soul
5. **Black Forest Trading Post** (1975-76, 4-1/2 min., color)
by Andrew Lugg

6. **Hallowe'en** (1976, 2-1/2 min., color)
Erindale Class Project
7. **Night of Samhain** (1974, 13 min., color)
by Richard Patten

8. **Les gens heureux n'ont pas d'histoire** (1976, 33 min., b&w, French)
by Paul Tana

Program III (84 minutes)

1. **Canadian Pacific** (1974, 11 min., color, silent)
- by David Rimmer
2. **Surreal** (1975, 4 min., color)
by Kim Cross
3. **Revival** (1965, 12 min., b&w)
by Don Shebib
4. **At 99: A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch** (1974, 24 min., color)
by Deepa Saltzman
5. **Symbiosis** (1973, 3 min., color)
Animated by David Cox
6. **Wild Onions** (9 min.)
Animated by Greg Hill
7. **Da Da Da** (1975, 1-1/2 min., color)
Animated by Peter Hudeki, Greg Miller
8. **98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm** (1966-1973, 12 min., color)
by Al Razutis
9. **Limited Engagement** (1976, 6-1/2 min., b&w)
by Tom Braidwood

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