Ron Mann's 
Poetry in Motion

Ron Mann's first feature documentary, *Imagine the Sound*, was a compelling look into the worlds and works of Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, and Ray Barret-Rivera. In *Poetry in Motion*, Mann explores the dynamic relationship between text and image, presenting a collection of performances by a diverse range of poets, including Charles Bukowski, Ron Padgett, and John Giorno.

Individually and together, these performances reveal a filmmaker capable of making the seemingly inaccessibly eminently accessible; a filmmaker capable of opening our eyes, ears and minds to worlds not universally known or appreciated. More important, Mann and his associates in both films, the artists in front of the camera and the craftsmen behind, achieve this with startling simplicity: they allow the considerable pleasures, power and resonance of both the word and the image to speak through the interplay of the textual and the auditory. Thus, Mann reveals a refreshing respect for the art, the artist, and the audience.

Clearly, Mann selects his subject based on a belief in its inherent expressive power; a power that, if allowed to connect with an audience, can achieve the same one-to-one immediacy of a live performance, will propel its own best spokesman. It is a power that underlines beliefs held by Mann and his collaborators that the art is not separate from life; that all art forms share a common human base and are, at their best, living expressions, inherent to us and accessible and intelligible to all.

The performances unfold in rapid succession, 23 variations on certain basic themes, exploring the expressive range of the spoken word and of the human voice and body, the word as sound as sound is voice, as voice is无力, as无力 is sound and sway, or contort, in response to the vocal expression.

Each of the poets is invited to perform in different aspects of these basic concerns, each performance a variation of these “themes,” an echo of his or her own voice, as different from one another as they are essentially the same. Every one of the performances, including Bukowski’s, is compelling in its own way, and each viewer will have his or her preferences.

Mann’s vision is essentially the same. Every one of the “readings” is a performance, a performance of the spoken word without sink­ing beneath the weight of the deadly TV-patented “talking heads” syndrome. This in itself is remarkable. But Poetry in Motion goes further. It is a film of electrifying energy — the art and artists pulse with a vitality so galvanizing that audiences view the film applaud and cheer spontaneously after almost every one of the “readings.” The poets are working the film audience, and that audience, as if the linking barrier-window of celluloid simply does not exist.

For these Canadian and American poets, a “reading” is a performance, a vital interaction between poet and audience, a life-giving act as important as the words it brings to life. And by performance I mean just that: not the lifeless, toneless, labour-readings of poems thrust into an unwanted spotlight, vocally transcribing their printed words, but a spirited, vitalized, electrifying collaboration with the reader, a voice rising, a voice falling, a voice becoming the voice of the text. Poetry in Motion captures and expresses this vitality, this total commitment to the language, to the words and to the poet who speaks them.

The performances are so great that even when the crystal clarity of the spoken word is compromised by a sound system as distorting as that used here, the performances still have their power and their meaning. Nevertheless, it is very difficult for the viewer to judge the merits of the performances, to form an opinion, to decide whether the poet was good or bad, whether the performance was successful or not.

In *Poetry in Motion*, Mann has chosen to emphasize the passion and energy of the performances, to present them in a raw, unvarnished state. This is not to say that the performances are perfect, or that they are flawless. On the contrary, they are raw, unfiltered, unpolished, and unvarnished.

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Nevertheless, Poetry in Motion fills an enormous void. “You’re a poet,” says John Giorno, “and there’s an audience, and whatever happens in between is the poem. It takes place in performance, on the page, and in any other fashion that connects with an audience.” And now, take it place on film.

Laurinda Hart

**REVIEW!**

**POETRY IN MOTION**

D/p Ron Mann


dem. Peter Meier, Helen Hennah, Jeff Powley

dec. Maureen Carr, Steven Dave, Steven Dave

corr. Michael Maccara, Kelly Silverman, Jack

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**REVIEW!**
REVIEWS

Claude Jutra’s
By Design

Inevitably one comes to realize that the vacuum in this new, and at first, By Design, must also reflect his emotional and artistic alienation in Canada. The film exhibits a faint imprint of his earlier work, but within the medium clearly indicates that the shift which has occurred in his own mind, and in cinematic terms, is to leading the Waterfront Party, which question there are few moments where Jutra succeeds in transforming an otherwise unsuccessful venture into a meaningful, touching film.

If we remember that Jutra once said, in 1973, speaking of his and others’ decision to boycott the Canadian Film Awards “My purpose in asserting that there are two cultures. We have not the same goals, styles, techniques or spirit. You cannot put these two under one roof,” we can also better understand what keeps Jutra in Toronto and points west (quoted in Martin Knelman, “Claude Jutra in Exile,” Saturday Night, March 1977). With the scripts and offers that float about in Toronto, Jutra can keep working (something he can’t do in Montréal). In its location in Quebec, and jump into the North American mainstream, culture, though, goes deeper than language.

Skill is everything that Jutra is dedicated to his work—whether the acclaimed Ada, Dreamspeaker or the ill-fated Surfacing—are, I’m sure, his utmost concern. However, his motivation for working with an issues as mental health (as explored in his motivation for working with an

• Mixing controversial designs in a controversial movie, Patty Duke Astin sits and listens as Sara Botsford plots the course.

Robert Menard’s
Une journée en taxi

Chalk up some points for dramatic irony. Just as the report sets off on another round of collective hand-wringing, an honest-to-God case in point for the viability of Canadian culture. Une journée en taxi (A Day in a Taxi), tipped sideways into Montreal theatres, did lousy at the box office and disappeared—this within a scant three weeks and despite the generally glowing review offered the film by the French press.

Fairness or lack of it is quite beside the point. The fact is that Robert Menard delivered the goods, and that anybody here bothered to pick them up. Score one for the home team.

This delicate, positively luminous little movie belies Menard’s status as a neophyte feature director because it flows with the graceful self-assurance you’d associate with a master filmmaker. And in a way, that’s precisely what he is. Several years as a feature producer and a ten-year wait before his first shot at directing, no meaning.

The dedication and passion that special address which furthered his vision. As the fashion models appear, the camera goes to the crotch, and closes in from below. The world of high fashion is made into an experience of pure sensation, without feeling. This is reinforced in that even the designer’s creations which the models are exhibiting have no more than a suggestion of the real thing.

The man viewing the fashion parade has a tired expression on his face. The "look" which is repeated many times over is never really seen as such. The dialogue is banal. The words which seem to spring from situation comedy, flat

The "beauty"—movement and sound—appear strung together. Perhaps Jutra felt that to counterpose these images would strengthen his central idea, but ultimately, the movie’s images say nothing startling, expressive, or even progressive. At its best, Jutra is capable of sensitively integrating his characters within their settings and circumstances. But in By Design only a single, brief close-up of the two lead actors conveys the sense of love for each other. Instead, the film is saturated with vulgar, inconsequential details, lacks good pacing, and serves more to mock his actors than present them effectively.

If the film was to have been a bold, inventive, humorous and touching tale, it is a completely forgettable experience. Lacking a coherent structure and tone, the film only serves up a mish-mash of moral overtones and misgivings.

Philip Szporer

February 1983 - Cinema Canada/43
here are a small-time con on a 36-hour leave from prison, and the jaded French cabby whose services he leases for a day's drive to nowhere in particular. Michelin (Jean Yanne) is a softspoken, cultured loner, a man who shut himself off from the world and left accounting for cab-driving eight years ago when his Quebec-born wife died of a heart attack. Very little in this world can provoke a reaction or ruffle his feathers, and that's initially a source of great irritation to his hyperkinetic passenger. Johnny (Gilles Renaud) is a perpetual loser with the emotional maturity of an overgrown adolescent, and a propensity for waving a handgun around like a baseball pennant. He's decided to use the occasion of his thirty-fifth birthday and this short-term freedom to pay off some debts, but nothing comes off quite the way he planned — when it comes to the crunch, he can't pull his trigger on the ex-partner who did him dirty, and he can't pull it on himself. His almost childlike despair and his utter loneliness finally win Michelin's sympathy, and two polar opposites begin to explore some common ground.

This friendship of circumstance develops, and you, even over those little moments when motivation and believability are severely tested. One such case is Michelin's almost immediate forgiveness of Johnny after a brutal attack — it's problematic and a little sentimental, but it still speaks through, maybe because the whole movie is so subtly sentimental from beginning to end. That fact works in its favour, as do the myriad other tones and elements that make up the film. Gilles Renaud has quite a task before him: Johnny is none too bright and rather unappealing, but Renaud still evokes a strange sympathy for the character as he stumbles about in blind desperation. The contrasts between this working class Quebecois and the somewhat erudite Frenchman are beautifully drawn (a wine-tasting lesson in a fancy restaurant is warm and funny), and Jean Yanne's performance is a masterful understated grace. Menard has the ingredients, and he's turned them over to a first-rate gift-wraper. Montreal absolutely shimmers, and it and its cast appeal with the images in this movie to get an idea of his range and sensibilities. The quality of his light here is clear and yet suffused, and it imparts a purity of texture to the film that accounts in good part for its special 'movie flavour. You just capitalize to the pictures.

Une journée en taxi confirms Michelin's status as one of this country's most exciting young cameramen; look no further than his work on Altman's Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean, which he contrasted with the images in this movie to get an idea of his range and sensibilities. The quality of his light here is clear and yet suffused, and it imparts a purity of texture to the film that accounts in good part for its special 'movie flavour. You just capitalize to the pictures.

Une journée en taxi is far from flawless, but the simple elegance of form and spirit here tend to wash away your reservations; you'll look to it as an example of just how to go about the business of making a film in a big way. It should be noted that a series of financial mishaps during production nearly axed the movie altogether, and that distribution deals for the rest of Canada remain nebulous as of this writing. This was almost the picture that didn't get the green light or permit viewing under our current cultural angst, so it should not become the picture that didn't get seen. That would really be a bit too much.

Anne Reiter •

**John Juliano's Latitude 55**

**REVIEWS**

Having heard almost nothing about Latitude 55 before seeing it, I had few expectations upon entering the theater: the title conjured images of the north, but not the far north, of wilderness, but not complete wilderness. As the film unraveled, I found that the expectations which arose in me spontaneously in response to the development story were being systematically thwarted, which is as it should be with a well-told story.

But by the end of the film I felt that the filmmakers, director John Juliano and co-scenarist Sharon Riff, had taken this technique too far, had, by presenting scenes over more mysterious and strange, left themselves no fully credible explanation for it all. If a story is to have maximum effect, it must directly relate to my own experience, to reality as I understand it. It is quite possible that one objective of Latitude 55 was to lead me from the apparently familiar to the palpably mysterious, even mystical, and thus to a new understanding of my own reality, but as the rug of what appeared to be real was continually pulled out from under me I became merely suspicious, and skeptically curious to see how the filmmakers would explain themselves. The final revelation, that the film's events had not been physically real at all, but had taken place in the heroine Wanda's mind, or in some other immutable limbo before her body gave up the ghost, was, I felt, too easy an explanation for the inconsistencies of the film.

**Latitude 55** opens with Wanda (Andree Pelletier) trying to start her car in a blizzard. The slow pace of this scene indicates that this is no adventure film: there is plenty of time for Wanda to light a flare, wash a few pills down with whiskey, tune in to several radio stations, and then to fall asleep to the sound of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg concerto on a portable tape deck. Some time later, Wanda is rescued by a man who carries her back to his isolated cabin, thaws her out, feeds her, and coddles her. It is quite possible that one objective of Latitude 55 was to lead me from the apparently familiar to the palpably mysterious, even mystical, and thus to a new understanding of my own reality, but as the rug of what appeared to be real was continually pulled out from under me I became merely suspicious, and skeptically curious to see how the filmmakers would explain themselves. The final revelation, that the film's events had not been physically real at all, but had taken place in the heroine Wanda's mind, or in some other immutable limbo before her body gave up the ghost, was, I felt, too easy an explanation for the inconsistencies of the film.

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Along the way, small almost technical details have interfered with the authenticity of the story: the incompletely convincing snowstorm; the nagging indeterminacy of Wanda's accent; West Canadian, edging sometimes into a Quebec twang; the inserts of a Polka dance between a native Indian tripod from which dangles some mysterious object, and Wanda's face — made up variously as a woman, a Polish officer, and an Indian shaman — to Wanda's final emotional crisis — whether she can reconcile herself with her own life.

Another chance meeting, another odd couple: Andree Pelletier and August Schellenberg

A curious friendship gets to the end of a long day: Gilles Renaud comforts Jean Yanne

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Bruce Elder's Illuminated Texts

Canadian film has always had a tendency to oscillate between two extremes. On one hand, there is a preference for films about little people in little situations becoming smaller. On the other, there is the wish to break out into epic forms, to people huge canvases with larger-than-life heroics. From *Back to God's Country* to *Silence of the North*, the stuff of epic just barely eludes us. Eventually, the artist is punished for his hubris.

Bruce Elder's new film, *Illuminated Texts*, seems to exist at both ends of this image dichotomy. It is, as far as possible, an individual work. Aided by an array of home-made electronics and optical printing devices, Elder pieced together the work in the solitude of his living-room/studio. But, more importantly, the film brings together the many facets of a single perspective. We are never allowed to forget that everything we are seeing is the meditation of one man alone in his room.

The solitary nature of *Illuminated Texts* is brought into focus in the film's opening passage. Elder, portraying a professor (which he is) of mathematics (one of his many avocations), welcomes a student into his apartment. Together they read their respective roles from Xeroxed scripts of Ionesco's *The Lesson*. The precursor becomes increasingly perturbed as the student stumbles over the fundamental concepts of addition and subtraction. Slowly we begin to sympathize with the student. In fact, these building blocks of mathematics are not only illogical but human and, finally, as threatening as the rage they induce. Like the hero in Godard's *Alphaville*, we are reminded that we can't know what 1+2 are until we know the meaning of "plus."

It could be said that the remaining three hours of *Illuminated Texts* is about the meaning of "plus." Working out of his dramatic preface, *Illuminated Texts* becomes alive with a collage of spoken and written texts amid a constantly changing pattern of eclectic imagery. Our first reaction is to look for a thread with which to bind this sensory bombardment. Elder's previous film, *Food, Gold*, used its two written and one spoken texts as counterpoints to induce. Like the hero in Gixlard's *A/p/a*, these building blocks of mathematics are work made possible by a computer. Before each sequence, we see Elder's editing instructions typed up on a multi-colored terminal. The implication is that the breath and complexity of the 9000 shots to unfurl before us are made possible only by this mechanized hand. This said, we are asked to avoid the facile conclusion that the film is a cold, structural exercise meant to distance us from a reading of its individual images. There is, in the film, above all, a passion in the thoughts presented and in the intersection of these thoughts with the film imagery. Recently, Elder declared himself to be "an enemy of Formalism." The narrow-minded pursuit of structure in his films is, to use Elder's term, fool's gold.