

# Business as (un)usual

Ten years ago, the equivalent of our current economic outlook would have devastated experimental film in this country.

by Seth Feldman

Canadian experimental film can be thought of as being comprised of two distinct sensibilities. The first of these begins with Norman McLaren's arrival - from England via the Museum of Modern Art - at the National Film Board. The work of McLaren and the other Film Board artists not only created world-class animation but also served to provide an incentive for experimentation in the Board's other endeavours. It was from the experimenters that the bloodline of Canadian documentary in the 50's and early 60's received an infusion that was in no small way responsible for the achievements of, for instance, the Unit B directors.

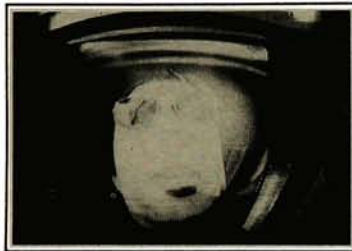
The culmination of this first movement of the Canadian experimental film came at Expo. The cinematic formats produced for the Canadian pavilion were monuments to the achievements of a quarter century by the civil service avant-garde. In retrospect, the Expo pieces were also its swansong. Too complex to reproduce, the installations could be critiqued and appreciated only by those who passed so quickly through them. Moreover, the Expo works suffered from a dreariness of content that undermined their dynamic form. They were too anonymous and, in the end, too full of goodthink. They were the dinosaurs of public service experimentation; it came as no surprise when they lost out to swifter, leaner beasts.

As the NFB sank into increasingly timid variations of the official style and the very heavy messages contained within it, the new breed emerged. The Centennial era was their watershed as well. Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland returned more and more frequently from New York, bringing with them the perceptions of the New American Cinema. A wave of new talent appeared in the nation's emerging film co-ops. It was also during the Centennial Year that the 'other' CFDC - that is, the Canadian Filmmaker's Distribution Centre - was formed. It was, unlike its government namesake, an agency that maximized Canadian content while discouraging entrepreneurial middlemen.

For its April 1970 issue, *artscanada* invited the American futurist, Gene Youngblood, to introduce the first works of these new filmmakers to the nation's artistic community. That Youngblood spent nearly half the article simply introducing the concept of alternate

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media may be some indication of how unprepared his readership was for the films he discussed. Or perhaps Youngblood was trying to frame the movement in the context of a McLuhanesque consciousness that he assumed would be at the forefront of the early 70's Canadian sensibility. Whatever his motivations, the remainder of the article was comprised of portraits of individuals isolated in time and space from each other and



from the traditions of the world experimental movement.

Youngblood was at least partially right. The postwar years that had in the U.S. been filled with films by Brakhage, Deren, Broughton and Mekas were, in this country, an artistic vacuum that would have to be overcome by the later-day arrivals. This was not so much a job for Snow and Wieland. Their sensibilities had been shaped by the mature genre they had encountered in New York; Snow and Wieland's work was, in a sense, the continuation of work that had never been done here. It would be up to the new people gathering around the CFDC, the Pacific Cinematheque and, to a lesser extent, the other regional co-ops, to do this fundamental backtracking.

Perhaps the most important figure in this regard has been Bruce Elder. Working with a keen awareness of the heritage of the world avant-garde cinema and a far ranging grasp of classical and contemporary aesthetics, Elder has done much of the homework for the Canadian experimental movement. Certainly, this has been the central thrust of his film work: *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* is our most sophisticated extrapolation of personal imagery; *Sweet Love Remembered* is striking in its simple, classic symmetry of recognizable form; and *1857; Fool's Gold* represents an achievement in personal technology that may be compared with anything produced in the world's informal network of home-vision workshops.

Elder has also been of central importance to the creation and sustaining of virtually all of the institutional infrastructure of Canadian experimental film in Ontario and at the federal level.

Like the other filmmakers of his stature - most notably David Rimmer, Al Razutis, Kirk Tougas, as well as Snow - it has fallen upon Elder to periodically justify the granting of arts funding to experimental work. The measure of success in this has been a level of government support for the avant-garde film second to none. Without being unduly optimistic, it may be said that public funding agencies in this country have provided the wherewithal by which young talent may be developed and established figures sustained. Moreover, these agencies have gone beyond the funding of individual artists to provide reasonable support of exhibition (the Funnel film theatre in Toronto), distribution (the now renamed CFMDC) and preservation (the Pacific and Quebec Cinematheques). On their part, educational institutions, until quite recently, have been sympathetic to the study of inde-



pendent film and the training of those who wish to work in the area.

Not surprisingly, though, institutional funding cutbacks are beginning to take their toll. Universities and colleges have reduced or eliminated film production courses. The remaining programmes have smaller rental budgets and thus take fewer chances renting new experimental works which have, by and large, a rather high cost per minute. Some public institutions - most notably, the Art Gallery of Ontario - have also cited financial restraint as a reason for cancelling their screenings of experimental work. And, of course, the cost of filmmaking equipment and materials has skyrocketed.

Ten years ago, the equivalent of our current economic outlook would have devastated experimental film in this country. Today, thanks to the skills and experience of its practitioners, its aggressive spokespeople and its administrators, the death of the movement seems unlikely. Cancelled screenings are offset by exhibition in new venues such as private galleries and, to a tiny, tentative degree, television. Experimental work plays an increasing role in non-industry film festivals. The Canada Council, in conjunction with the Aca-

demy of Canadian Cinema, is sponsoring an Independent Short Film Showcase patterned after a similar American attempt to get this kind of work into commercial theatres.

Production expenses are, to some degree, being controlled by an increasing use of super-8 as an experimental format. This was particularly evident at this year's International Super-8 Film Festival in Toronto, where an experimental film was awarded the grand prize and the majority of the judges' discretionary awards. (On the other hand, despite Youngblood's prognostication, video is not seen as an alternative production medium. Filmmakers like to touch the stuff; video-makers are another kind of people.)

Canadian experimental film has elicited unprecedented attention abroad. Snow's major show at the Pompidou Centre in Paris is simply the most visible manifestation of a wave of work by major Canadian filmmakers that has been seen across Europe and the States. The *Canada in Berlin* retrospective currently being organized by Elder will continue the momentum. And Canadians themselves may come to appreciate the movement during the Festival of Festivals' 1982 survey of Canadian cinema (if the Festival organizers can muster the requisite taste and courage).

Perhaps the most significant evidence of the health of Canadian experimental cinema is its ability to replenish itself. In the last half decade, at least three of the major figures cited by Youngblood - Wieland, Jack Chambers and Greg Curnoe - have been lost to the movement. Yet the Canadian avant garde is sustained not only by its "names" but also by the equally noteworthy talents of people like Rick Hancox, Veronika Soul, Jim Anderson, Chris Gallagher, Andrew Lugg and Julian Samuel. Best of all, new filmmakers are emerging and being recognized. Patrick Jenkins is the example most frequently cited. But word is also beginning to spread about the work of people such as John Porter, Robert Rayher, Rafael Bendahan, Barbara Sternberg, Steve Niblock and Villem Teder.

What does this all mean? Is there an aesthetic shape to Canadian experimental cinema that makes all of this individual activity something more than just a set of dots on the oversized national map? Can the movement survive the passing of Youngblood's McLuhanesque sensibility?

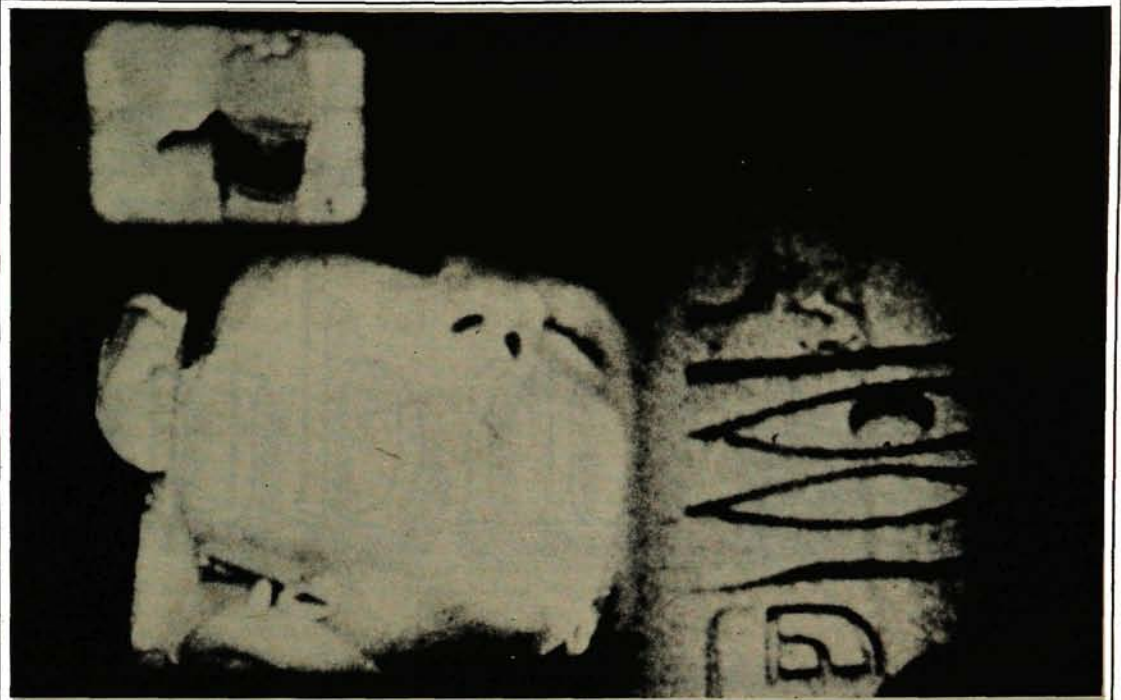
Canadian experimental cinema has attracted some better than average theorists and critics - in the persons of Blaine Allen, Regina Cornwell and Anna



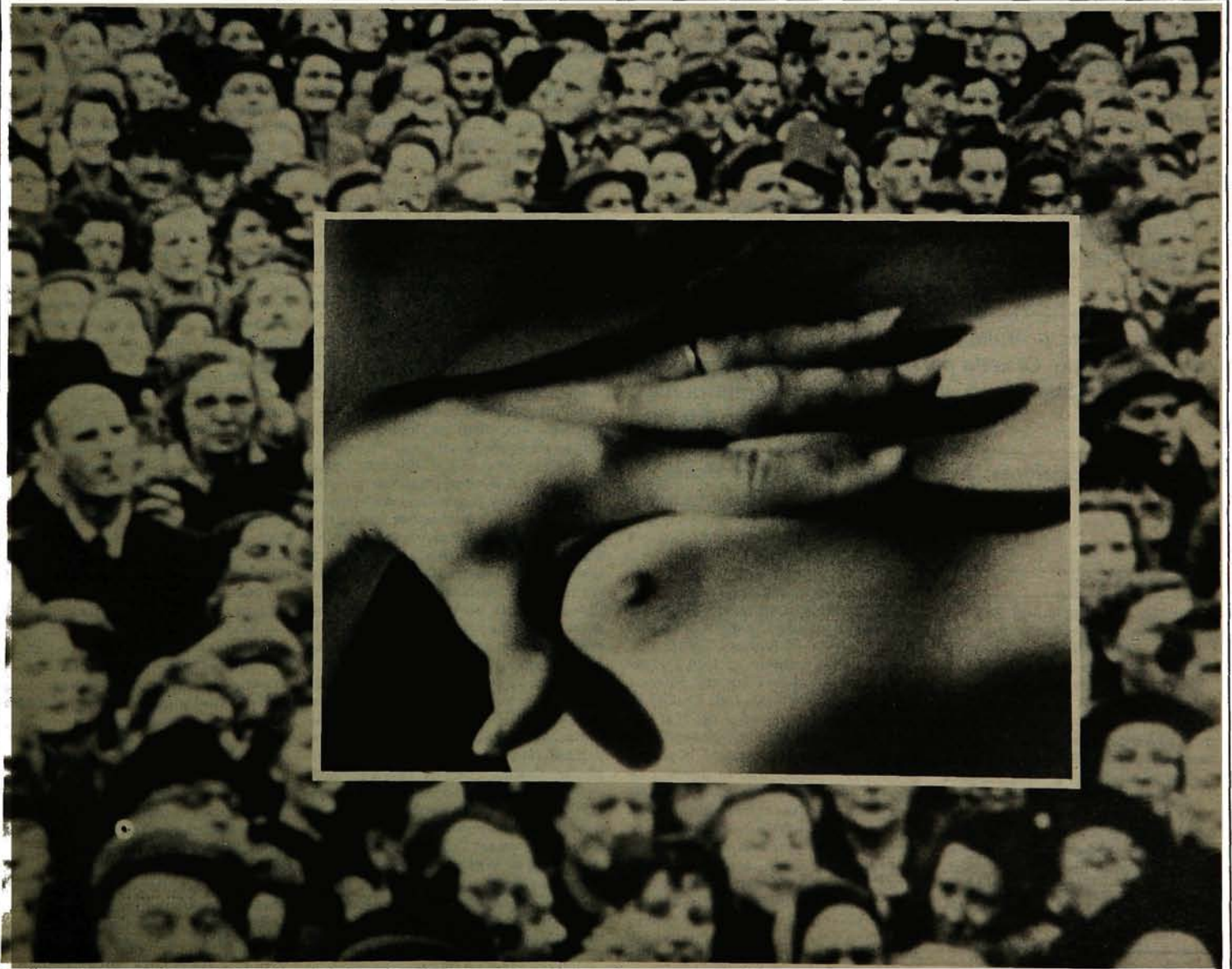
# MAKING IT

Gronau. Characteristically, though, it is Elder who, in an as yet unpublished paper, seems to be closest to finding something linking the tremendous energy of these disparate figures. Without claiming to summarize his argument in this short space, it is fair to say that he can link Canadian experimental film with a post-modernist sensibility that is best exemplified in a unique appreciation of the photographic image. To put Elder's thesis in another context, perhaps it might also be said that the Canadian experimental cinema, far from being a collection of subjective perceptions is, in fact, a mass response to the fixed, stylized forms and the predominance of a narrow range of iconography in the "conventional" English Canadian cinematic experience.

Like Japanese cinema, Canadian Film as a whole is pedantic; it must justify the time it consumes in a newly emerging technological society. The harsh codification inherent in our major media threatens, in the long run, to tell us only what we already know. The role of Canadian experimental cinema, to rephrase Elder's contention, is to mimic this epistemology through a self-conscious awareness of codification. We are on our guard. As a result, what seems to be idiosyncratic, inaccessible visions are in fact, the best mirrors we have.



● The Art of Worldly Wisdom by R. Bruce Elder



● Opposite: Al Razutis in portrait, and David Rimmer's *Watching for the Queen*. Above, Rimmer's crowd surrounds R. Bruce Elder's *Sweet Love Remembered*.