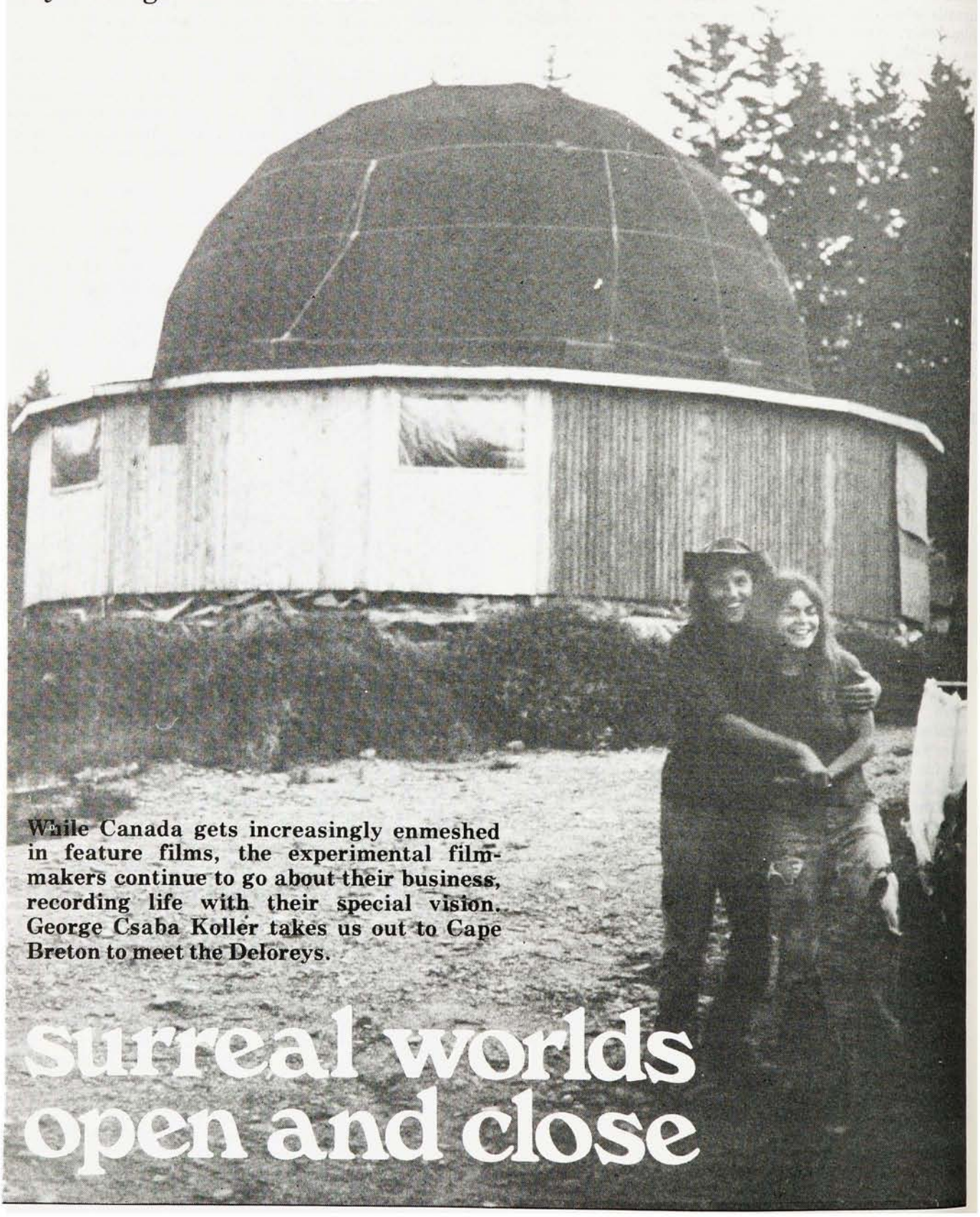
walter and ellis delorey

by George Csaba Koller



While Canada gets increasingly enmeshed in feature films, the experimental filmmakers continue to go about their business, recording life with their special vision. George Csaba Koller takes us out to Cape Breton to meet the Deloreys.

surreal worlds open and close

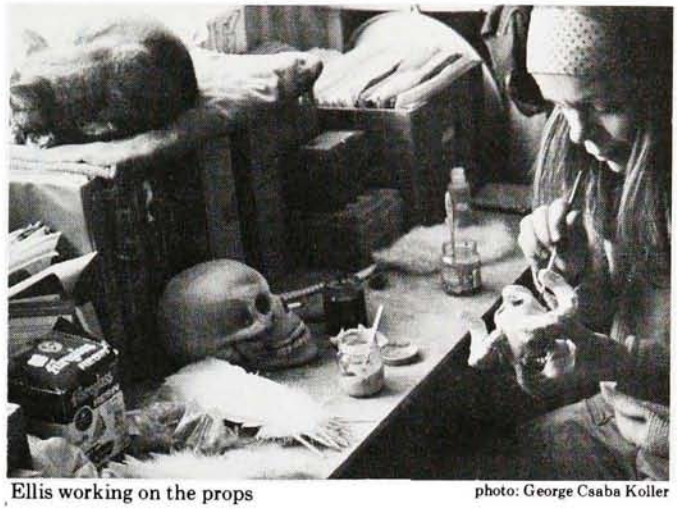
Somewhere near the Gulf of St. Lawrence on idyllic Cape Breton, Walter and Ellis Delorey decided to settle on one hundred acres of woodland. They made their move two years ago from Ward's Island in Toronto, presumably finding even that pastoral spot too urbanized and probably fed up with the constant threat of eviction which still hangs over the residents there. They decided to build an unusual house in Nova Scotia, and set to work, living in the back of a pickup truck. The polyangular, almost circular wood frame house has a black-topped geodesic dome which will eventually be finished as a studio. Walter and Ellis are both filmmakers and photographers, and have been working on Walter's experimental nature films together since 1972.

That was the year that they were dropped by helicopter into the Yukon wilderness for the first time. They spent six weeks camping and capturing the wonders of nature on film. Ellis is the camping expert; she packed all the provisions for their daily consumption, providing a varied menu which even included Arctic pizza. The film that resulted from that first trip is **Great Rain Mountain,** a beautifully evocative study of the flora and the fauna on St. Elias Mountain, accompanied by an electronic score. The following year they repeated the excursion, this time coming up with **Cold August Wind**, similar to the first effort, yet hauntingly different. Jim Montgomery did the synthesized music for this one as well. The year after that Ellis went off on her own to do a film on backpacking with Susan Clarke, but in 1975, the Deloreys went to British Columbia to make **Green Feathered Sea** and **Deep Blue Sleep.** The former is a study of a sea-life and bird sanctuary on Triangle Island, while the latter veers toward the abstract as dancing patterns of light on water act as visual compliments to the eerie score.

Walter's preoccupation with the mystical aspects of nature resulted in the concept for a trilogy, **Adam, Silver** and **Shaman.** They shot a short version of **Shaman** while still in Toronto, with Walter wearing a ram-horned headpiece and a painted face, emerging out of the water like some primitive god, illustrating man's oneness with nature. Presently, they are working on **Silver,** an elaborate nature fantasy, on a $15,000 Canada Council grant. They are both gifted visual artists, and Walter's storyboard is richly illustrated with the half-human, half-beast characters which play out a drama of life and death.

My interview with Walter took place in the middle of a cow pasture at dusk, and we were interrupted at one point by a herd of four-legged milkers who surrounded us and stared as if wanting to know the reason for the intrusion into their territory. Walter's thoughts kept drifting off from film talk to fox, eagle and general farm talk. (He mentioned that he has red and green color blindness, which must really make it strange for him as a cinematographer of green foliage and red flowers.) He adheres to the Indian way of thinking that no one really "owns" the land, yet each morning he picks up his Bolex and a tripod, and wanders off into "his" woods, not to be seen until lack of light makes it impossible to shoot. He has built a lair for high-angle concealed shooting. Ellis stays at home, working on her own art work, keeping house, and making elaborately beautiful costumes for **Silver.**

The story concerns a blue bear and a magical sphere. "It starts off with the moon at night, very much like tonight," explains Walter. "I could put on the costumes and show you the story. Shamans are half man and half animal. A bear shaman is in the woods by the light of the full moon. Shamans represent pantheism in the sense of that relationship to nature that modern man seems to have lost or is looking for. So the shaman in Indian culture is the man who can talk to the spirits. He has sought out a continuity in time, and understands how the past was and how the future will be. You see the moon through the trees, then you see a sphere or a silvery globe, then some water drops, and you hear distant thunder, so you know there's a rainstorm coming on. The blue bear dances beneath the cloudy cloak of the moon; he's holding the silver sphere, the symbol of all magic and life. He dances with joy."



Ellis working on the props photo: George Csaba Koller

At this point he'd like to do some spectacular effects, like turning the whole forest upside down in the bear's paw, but finances limit his creativity. He would like to hire actors to play the different parts, but so far, all the costumes are designed to be worn by Walter, while Ellis will do the camera work on those sequences. The bear walks around and touches the trees and the trees turn silver. Magic. Walter had a very profound experience in the Yukon being all alone and having ingested a hallucinogen. He imagined that a huge bear was after him. He climbed a tree, but could not get away from the snorts and heavy breathing of the animal. Clinging to a branch, terrified, he finally realized that the sound effects were being made by his own breathing. He had good cause to be worried, though – the area was covered with fresh bear tracks.

On the way up to the Yukon that time, he read books on the philosophies of all the major religions. "I was getting myself into a religious experience, trying to relate to nature. 'What is God?' I kept asking myself simple questions like that," he recalls, laughing. "That's where my head was at when I started to go up there. The acid trip, which was a rare experience for me, showed me that nature could be perceived even beyond the normal. The optical effects of acid can be duplicated for people who don't want to get into drugs. You could teach people to perceive nature as an aesthetic experience, and perhaps make a living doing it."

Watching his Yukon films, this viewer is left with the impression that God's creatures are like beings from another planet, governed by some unifying intelligence: the white mountain sheep climbing on the rocks, the gophers coming out of their holes for a cleansing ritual, the magnificent birds taking flight. Perhaps the spacy music adds to that perception. But above all, one is left with admiration for the artist whose patience and keen insight into nature is instrumental in capturing such wonders on celluloid. His sense of composition, color and texture raises his films far above the run-of-the-mill nature fare shown on television.

Walter Delorey was born in Quebec City just after the war ended. "They knew I was coming, so they quit," he quips.

George Csaba Koller, former editor/publisher of Cinema Canada, is presently at work on a research project on Canadian experimental films. He hopes to write a book on the subject next year.

A costume sketch

"My father ran a little grocery store and we lived above it, sort of like **Lies My Father Told Me.** I went to a Catholic school in a very rigid school system. We weren't allowed to go to the theatre until we were 18. Other than being the best athlete and not getting beat up by the local bullies, I managed to get to Grade 12. My father got me a camera, a regular-8 movie camera, and I shot stuff like parades. I learned to edit these home movies. I learned to do some animation; this little guy comes along and knocks over a couple of plastic soldiers and pulls down a pillar. It's the best thing I ever did," he laughs again, remembering.

What gave him the idea to go to the Yukon and do those films? "I was in the militia in Grade 12 and took a six-week survival course. I had done films but I wasn't really interested in filmmaking. So I went to study geology at St. Francis college. If a guy like me can do good in college, anybody can. Then I took a picture of an accidental explosion, and sold it door-to-door to people, asking 'Were you there?' I never knew you could sell something door-to-door like that. Then I found out about photography at Ryerson."

He also worked one summer for the Mines Department, carrying rock samples up North for young American geologists. He got tired lugging heavy rocks around, so he used to chip small bits off and throw most of the big ones away. That ended that career, but his time in the wilderness obviously influenced his artistic development. He spent three years at Ryerson, where he met Ellis, but refuses to say too much about his experiences, since the teachers are still alive.

Another major influence on the developing artist is a fascination, with all forms of fantasy: science fiction films, Escher drawings, and comic books. He spent $300 on 3,000 comic books, and often browses through them before going to sleep in order to inspire dreams. The script for **Silver** was inspired by a series of dreams. Is it really fantasy, or is it a deeper level of reality? "I dreamt part of it. I discussed it with Ellis, and she made suggestions. Ever since **Shaman,** I've been turning my camera sideways. I turn it upside down, too, sometimes. Then I think 'I hope nobody sees me doing this.'" His neighbors on Cape Breton probably think that he's loony, what with running around in a blue bear costume at night and filming things upside down in the daytime. "If I had an optical printer, boy! If the Canada Council would give me money for an optical printer, then I could really make movies!"

He shot **Green Feathered Sea** on negative stock and Charles Bagnall of Toronto did the opticals on it. But now Walter can't even afford to do that: the original budget for **Silver** was twice what he received from the Council. So now he just looks for the surreal in his subject matter. He's been fascinated with insects ever since childhood. One of the major characters in **Silver** is a dragonfly. During one of our walks in the woods, we came across an unusual pile of sawdust underneath a tree. Upon closer examination it turned out that an army of ants was methodically digging a hole a few feet up the trunk, and clearing the white, powdery dust bit by bit to form the pile underneath. Walter promised to return the next day and film the phenomenon.

"Sometimes I get into **Silver** so deeply it becomes real to me. I was going to do an anti-trapping film; then I dreamt the story. It has changed quite a lot since then, but retains the original feeling. All we've been able to do with our finances is to get into the very first part, where the bear and the death character meet. We're going to have the introduction of the insect; it will be cut up a lot. The insect will always appear, bzzzzz, bzzzz, bzzzz, near-far, near-far – very unusually cut."

The elaborate costume for the death character features a leg-hold trap, a topic Walter feels very strongly about. He recounts how he's seen trees which were gnawed through in agony by the dying bear, some of whom take more than a week to die. So even though **Silver** is not an overt anti-trapping film, the undertones are definitely there. Wherever the bear turns, death is always there ahead of him. "Death gets him; that's the plot," he continues. "The bear's magic sphere becomes a bubble floating down a stream. All the other characters come into the picture: the moose, the fox shaman, the bird. They find the bear's body, and they decide to call upon the silver shaman, who lives inside the sphere. They recover the sphere, they summon him, and he takes the bear's body through some mystical changes, through the sub-atomic world."

Walter playing the silver shaman

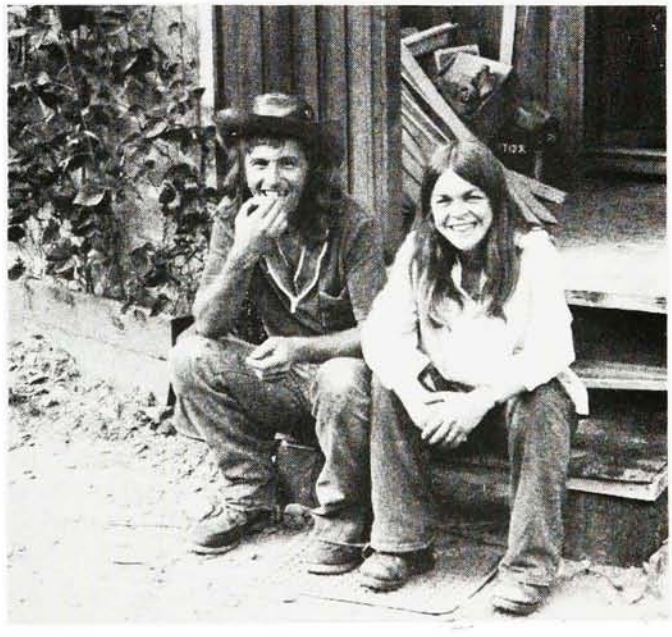
A recent letter from Walter brings us up to date: "Getting the camera rolling again has been difficult as the doors to surreal worlds open and close at will, and pursuing nature footage (mammals) is oft times frustrating. However, it is at the heights of such moments that I give in and turn the camera sideways. Another side of me panics and wants to return the camera to an upright position and a struggle ensues. The latter (consciousness of equilibrium – variable pressure in the ear drums), coupled with a fear of being seen doing such an odd thing, becomes so agitated, he (it – negative energy) virtually overcomes my body and tries to bump the camera or stall until the light is gone.

"When, about fifty per cent of the time, magic prevails, I find the strength to shoot and compose and my yield is rich indeed. Sideways shots seem so easy, but the more I think about it, these shots are my best footage, as no optical printing is required to create a sense of wonder. Not all side shots are effective, however, as certain angles and the relationship of the object to water and the reflective images, and the relationship of the object to the centre of the frame all contribute to the illusion of a new, Escher-like effect. This is now easy and I crave a new discovery...

"Are all of man's musings about God, life, eternity a result of our body's mortality or merging into earth? As I play with the easy games of God and infinity, I think of the bog lemmings I have seen struggling in the cat's jaws, the cows in the field who came to see us, and the craving for the flesh of the aliens who share this planet with us. What would happen if man were the cow, and the cow the man? Surely cows and deer and even insects must have tried the magic foods and been to the centres of their being. It seems to me that man is vain, and perhaps wrong, in placing himself at the pinnacle of intelligence because he/she has modified the planet to his/her liking. Not very successfully, even failing to make peace with nature.

"Anyhow, **Silver** will now change to deal with life, death, rebirth, seasons, and magic in a deeper and expanded script. **Silver** is just a working title, we might call it **Atmansilver.** Mushrooms and ferns could be used as giant palaces for special effects insect shaman riding dragonflies! Ellis is directing the bear's dance with the silver sphere. She and I co-create the costumes, with Ellis adding that flow to the bear's cape and I the madman inside it."

More recently, Ellis writes that the shooting of the film was held up on account of real shooting in the area. The hunting season was on. "Seen any hunters going home with a blue bear on the hood of the camper?" They are doing their best to insulate the house before the super freeze hits, are both teaching photography at the local school to make ends meet, and are hauling 300 lbs. of firewood a day to stock up for the heavy snows. Ellis says this is artistically frustrating, but "the silence, the privacy, and most of all, the magic of nature, always seem to keep us from hitting the bottom. Just when the rain and mud and work seem endless, something always happens – a rainbow materializes over the little church across the valley, or the eagle flies up the river, or a deer appears in the trees right behind the house. And suddenly everything's okay again." □



The Deloreys at home

photo: George Csaba Koller