



I am a filmmaker trying to make a living from my own experimental films. While trying to research and write an article for Bruce McDonald about short film distribution in Canada, I was given the following advice: "Get a day job. Make films with Arts Council Money. An experimental film cannot pay for itself." Is this fact true?

I agree that experimental films have a bad name. Often what is called 'experimental' is: self-centred, self-indulgent, elite, boring, long and has very little to do with an experiment. Have you suspected this before? "My film didn't turn out, so I'll call it experimental." If a film is made for what seems to be an audience of one person, is it worth the effort? I understand that short experimental films are seldom shown. But short experimental films are what I want to make. Can I make a living from this? I need to know the truth.

Tentatively, I increased the speed of the car to 55 miles an hour. As I passed the black '86 Camaro on Hwy. 401, headed to Ottawa, my heart surged with the spirit of adventure. The wind seemed to blow away the smell of mouse nests that the car had acquired from the long period of time it had spent sitting in a field. It also seemed to blow away the doubt in my mind, imposed by the local rural wisdom of Teeswater that the '67 Ford Falcon would fall to pieces, once taken on The Highway. "The rust, it's just surface rust," said the farmer who sold it to me. I had bought my first car. This was my first trip with it.

But I had other things to worry about. I was trying to make an experimental film. I was three and a half years into a six-month project. The 10 minute blockbuster film that was to set the world on its ear and prove that I was a great filmmaker, was nothing but silent animation tests.

So, on Thursday morning, October 16, 1986, I phoned the poet Colin Morton (a man I'd never met before). I had some money and the San Francisco Poetry Film Festival was seven weeks away. "Mr. Morton," I said, "I'm on my way out to Ottawa to make a film with you." He didn't object.

I realize that there are benefits to short filmmaking. First of all, a filmmaker can achieve 100 per cent aesthetic, conceptual and thematic control over the project. This doesn't happen on a feature. And then, there is a limited budget, and a limited risk in making a short film. You can blow a short film and still work in the same town. The problem looks like distribution; but

how do some short films reach a large audience?

Take the films of Norman McLaren. Internationally, his name is most often included in any sentence containing the words 'film' and 'Canada'. He changed the world's perception of filmmaking. His films are experimental, short, use the barest of resources but reach a massive audience.

As an example, in 1957 he made the 10 minute film, *A Chairy Tale*. The materials used were: one studio, one actor, and one chair. Through the

process of live action filming and frame-by-frame pixilation, a man tries to sit on a reluctant chair. The National Film Board could not quote the audience the film has reached, but in 1988 the film still works and is still shown.

The tick-tick-tick of the engine penetrated my thoughts. I was seized by the situation, luckily my engine was not. Four and a half litres of oil later, I arrived in Ottawa on Colin Morton's door-step. That night we started looking for material to make a soundtrack. I kept thinking though, "Why did Norman McLaren's films work?" It seemed that he was able to take a subject and analyse it to no end on a micro scale. The simplicity of *A Chairy Tale* was that it was about one man and one chair, but the film, by being so thorough on the micro scale, actually spoke to a macro audience. The film revealed something about universal "Chairness", "Manness", and what it feels like to be sat upon. By using an experimental technique, Norman McLaren could show something common to an audience, in a way that they had never seen before.

I'm trying to make a film like that.

That night, we found a piece that Colin Morton had adapted from a 40-minute nonsense poem, *Ursonate*, written by the late German DaDaist, Kurt Schwitters. On Friday, over an extended lunch break from Colin's day job, writing for the government, we recorded his performance in a local radio station. With the soundtrack done, we mapped out an animated choreography of the text of the poem. The film was going to be a very closeup view of the words, typed onto paper. These words, through animation, would become lively, and would dance to the rhythms and feelings that the poem inspired.

I took our plans and the soundtrack back to Teeswater, and typed the animation onto 3,409 sheets of paper. We called it *Primiti Too Taa*. The 3-minute, 16mm film made it in time for the San Francisco Film Festival. They bought a copy.

Primiti Too Taa has since won four awards and has been shown around the world, even in Zagreb, Yugoslavia. Herwig Gayer, my assistant, now has reanimated the 3,409 pages of typing. The 35mm version sold to the *Spike and Mike Festival of Animation*.

I am on the road again, driving my car, which is now painted plaid and am headed for Chicago to an IMAX theatre owners, convention. I have a 70mm version of *Primiti Too Taa* under my arm, in exchange for our house. I hear that IMAX lacks product. They have only a little more than 65 films for their 65 theatres. And the longest film they have is 41 minutes. This looks like a medium for short experimental films and a really big audience. Next stop: Chicago.

Editor's Note: Ed Ackerman was tragically killed in an automobile accident on the way to Chicago. He was to unveil the IMAX version of *Primiti Too Taa*. Mr. Ackerman is survived by his wife Cathy and his two small children, Zara and Brandon. Send all donations to the *Ed Is Dead* fund to: Teeswater, Ontario, Canada.

by Ed Ackerman

FOR THE MASS EXPERIMENTAL FILM