

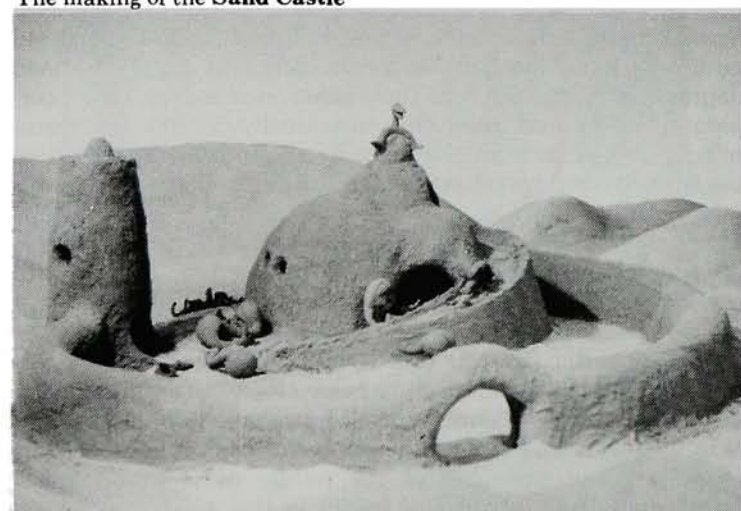
annecy report

Each year, the animation enthusiasts of this world gather together to see recent work and to award prizes. The gathering places are alternately Annecy, Zagreb and, since last year, Ottawa. Ian Birnie was in Annecy this year and reports on some of the Canadian entries.

by Ian Birnie



The making of the **Sand Castle**



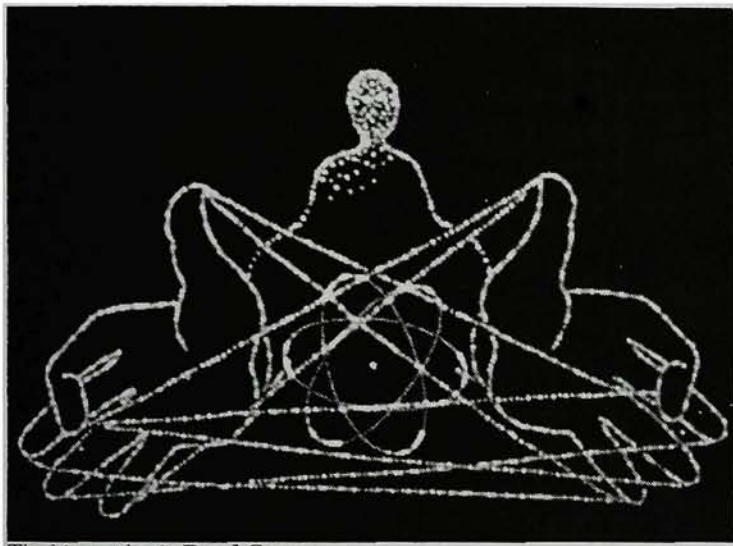
The annual international animation festival – this year held in its biannual home, Annecy, France – honored Canada for the ‘best national selection’, a label that was further born out by the prize winners. A compliment to be sure, yet of the 14 official entries only three stood up to international competition and all were from established NFB animators.

Co Hoedeman’s **The Sand Castle** – the popular hit of the festival and a grand prize winner (with Holland’s **David**) – is a funny, charming look at a society of plastecine creatures who methodically build a fortress of sand only to see it swept away by the inevitable wind. Far from being a pessimism laden tract on the futility of endeavor, the film exudes a rarely seen *joie de vivre* and succeeds as a celebration of communal industry. Hoedeman’s almost childlike perception of character provides his polyglot workforce with a requisite number of whimsical trunks, tentacles, hands, beaks and brows – all of which are skillfully animated for the purpose of drilling, shaping, and smoothing sand. Working at a table-top sandbox, this Dutch-born animator, whose past films (**Tchou-Tchou**, **The Owl and the Crow**, **Lumaaq**) reveal an attraction to legend, has created a convincing, self-contained world, and his finest film to date.

The world of Caroline Leaf’s **The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa** (Critic’s Prize: Best Film), is equally self-contained, but it is a closed, silent world, punctuated by sharp foot-falls, knocks, and the thick, inarticulate voices of frightened people. Adapted from Kafka’s **Metamorphosis**, this horrifying story of a man who awakes one morning to find himself a dungbeetle, is compressed, airless and filled with waiting; on one side of the bedroom door lies the now-inhuman son, on the other sit the stunned, hostile family. Animating in sand, Leaf has abandoned the first-person narrator for a less subjective point of view and though one may keenly regret losing this bug eye on the world in the one art form that could conceivably visualize it, the exhilarating, uncanny shifts of perspective that result are ample compensation. This daring stylistic manoeuvre, comparable to a

disembodied eye exploring a collapsing set, is Leaf's richest gift to animation: in one three-second sequence, the gaze is swept from the insect, slid under the door, lifted across the living room, to finally twist back of the mother's head, and end in a close-up of her knotted bun – this web of thick black lines. If the film suffers at all it is from being almost too abstract, too chiaroscuro, unlightened with dialogue as was **The Street**, or broken into the clearly divided planes – the snow and the sea – of **The Owl and the Goose**. But style expresses subject and at the end, when the possibility of logic is swallowed up by the blackness, there is only the sense of a powerful, disturbing vision.

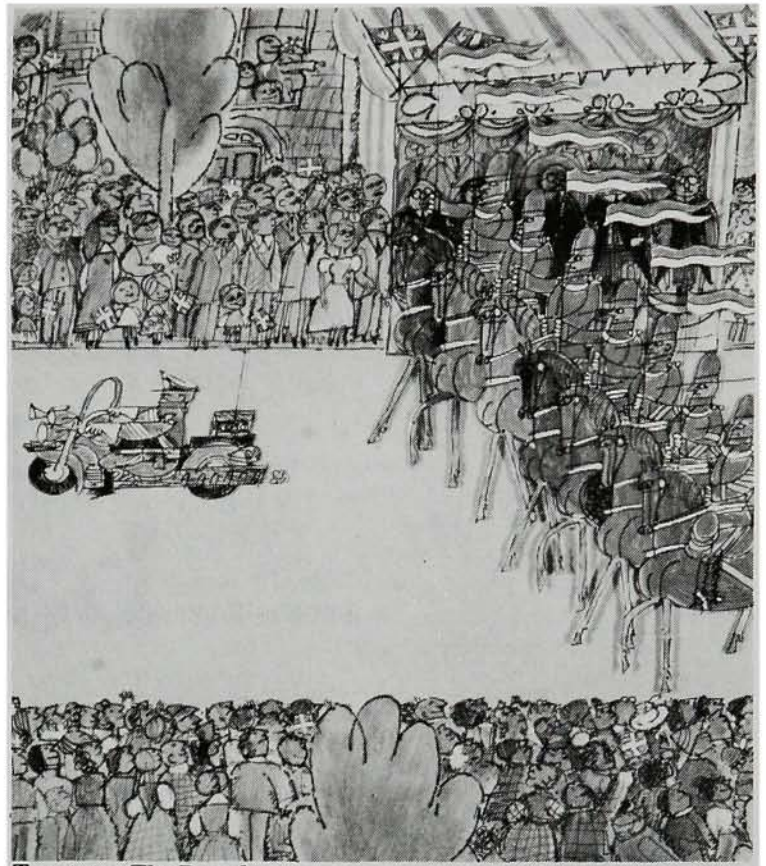
Perhaps some of the intensity of the film reflects circumstances: originally undertaken with funding from the American Film Institute, it became a three-year project, and something of a struggle to complete. Unable to interest the NFB in the project (they will now distribute the film), Miss Leaf worked on it at home, frequently fearing – so she expressed at a press conference – that she would lose track of the flow. This concern also reflects her working approach, as she “starts with a strong image and builds out in both directions”. A story-board is rare. She works from a “rough plan that changes a lot” which enables her to “work the sand in a more painterly way”. This is clearly an essential element of her style as the “whirling” effects are entirely done with animation; no camera is moved.



The kinaesthetic **Bead Game**

Ishu Patel's **The Bead Game**, is all movement; for six-and-a-half minutes, the story of human evolution is perceived as constant metamorphosis. Drifting, shooting, devouring, melting, whirling beads of light provide a kinaesthetic excitement difficult to convey in words, but impossible to resist on viewing. The fluidity of the images – crystal clear eruptions of color, hypnotically paced – scarcely suggests Patel's rigorous technique. Throughout four months he worked on a sheet of glass covered with 2mm of plastecine which was scraped away to allow the light patterns to emerge. An NFB animator since 1971, Indian-born Patel, whose **Perspectrum** (1975) was seen at Ottawa '76, brings a unique eye for pattern to a style of animation usually reserved for computer.

Ian Birnie is education officer in charge of media programs at the Art Gallery of Ontario. During the winter of 1975-76 he organized and exhibited a major animation series at the Art Gallery Theatre which included over 200 films, both an international selection and a remarkable Hollywood retrospective.



Taratata: The Parade

Three films do not a festival make... or do they? In some sense there is no choice: after 5 solid nights of screenings, often lasting until one a.m., a handful of films stay lodged in the memory, the rest fade. And one chooses to let them go, not because they lack interest, but because of an irony that arises from the density of the medium with its concentrated information: when a film works it often seems very simple; when it misses, it appears incredibly complex. Perhaps additional viewings will unravel the complexities of three films that were very much part of Canada's “best national selection”.

The Revenge of Objects, by Pierre Veilleux, is a free-wheeling portrait of the bruised life in rue St. Laurent. The excellent animation, ripe color and outrageous humor, fail to mask a disturbing ambivalence to the subject. In **Taratata: The Parade**, by Frederick Back, cut-out animation is brought into neat formation for a gentle look at a parade from a small boy's imaginative perspective. The film has a sure touch but the pastel color and unabashed sentimentality keep it at picture book distance. **No Apple for Johnny** has a great subject – the diary of an apprentice teacher – but fails crucially where it matters most: at script level. Author/animator John Weldon's overly pragmatic approach to the narrative limits the animation to illustrations (they are very handsomely done) and forces the humor.

In closing, let me mention two films shown out of competition; well-done, though slight, they serve to illustrate the range of festival submissions. Veronika Soul's **A Said Poem** sent by in a flash – which is part of the fun – but this collage accompaniment to John Columbo's ‘found poetry’ remains on the level of stylistic experiments and only suggests this independent animator's accomplishments with more developed material. I've saved what may be the most fully Canadian entry for last: a **CBFT Station Identification “Winter”**, by Société Radio-Canada so deftly transformed summer country grasslands into mounds of snow glistening under inky skies that for the entire one-minute and 5-seconds of running time, France, in June, vanished. The power of animation should never be underestimated. □