



Richard Reeves

By Barbara Goslawski

Richard Reeves produces some of Canadian cinema's most accomplished animated imagery and he does it all by hand. Painstakingly drawing, scratching and painting on the celluloid, he creates a hypnotic barrage of colours, shapes and rhythms. His is cameraless animation at its best. Many are familiar with his multi-award winning *Linear Dreams* (1997) and will no doubt greet *Sea Song* (1999) with the same awe and enthusiasm. Think of some of Norman McLaren's best moments, particularly from *Begone Dull Care* (made with Evelyn Lambart in 1949) or *Blinkity Blank* (1955), add an astonishing hand-drawn soundtrack, and you can start to imagine the experience of watching Reeves's films.

Abstract in nature, Reeves's films almost defy description. The difficulty stems from the sheer visceral charge of watching shapes and colours collide and morph, ripple and explode creating a multiplicity of rhythms in a single moment. However, once we catch our breath we recognize a subtle logic at work beneath the surface. Reeves explains: "When abstract colour and form are put into motion, it can represent the way we dream and visualize. We can see pictures in our mind without our eyes." Under Reeves's careful direction, the films assume a dream logic and take the form of a cyclical journey. It is essentially the experience of watching thought in motion. "The result is a kind of kinetic art experience," he says, "a motion poem, comparable to watching thoughts."

In *Linear Dreams*, Reeves leads us into the uncharted (and unchartable) landscape of the imagination. Rooted in the human body, the film flows freely within and without this seemingly arbitrary structure. *Linear Dreams* begins with a heartbeat and its visual corelative, a pulsing line from which all things spring. Images literally explode from and implode into this central energy source. Once united with the human form, this energy source propels the movement of the film outward into the vast unknown, across a series of mountain ranges. This journey inevitably turns inward again, returning to its origins.

The natural world figures prominently in both *Linear Dreams* and *Sea Song*. It's an important source of inspiration for the filmmaker. This relationship is central to *Sea Song*. In this film, the journey begins with an explosion of dots which

eventually settles into a clear night sky littered with stars, the night's stillness permeated by a lighthouse beam. The film quickly plunges into a fantastical waterworld where the familiar and bizarre converge. Reeves deftly mixes the rhythms of various elements—the water, the sea creatures and a yellow submarine—in a complex series of movements that transform the frame itself into a pulsing source of creative energy. The result is a world both within and beyond our wildest dreams.

Reeves's hand-drawn soundtracks are key to establishing this heightened dream state. They are a prime element of the rhythmic electricity these films produce. Complex, the soundtracks engage with the visual rhythms in an elaborate interplay. This relationship proves interdependent, as sound and image combine as parts of an elaborate whole, symbiotically fused. The filmmaker aptly describes it as "the weave of picture and sound into one conceptual unit" and views it as an organic relationship. "The handmade sounds are the perfect accompaniment for the visuals. This is the purest form of cameraless animation," he says. Reeves begins each film with the sound, "creating optical shapes, arranging patterns and tonal differences. This creates a perimeter in time and space for the application of the visuals." He creates the soundtrack using the same principles used for the imagery, arranging the shapes and patterns visually. Reeves is not a purist in the strictest sense. Experimenting with other means to produce or enhance his sounds, in *Sea Song* he uses a variety of machine-made shapes, everything from "stick-on dots" to dry-letter transfers to letatrone. Reeves explains that these "stick-on shapes, being so perfectly spaced, produce very pure tones, hums, beeps, synthesizer sounds and alien voices. One of these days I'll get the projector to talk." He used a computer in making both *Linear Dreams* and *Sea Song* but only to enhance his handmade sounds, adding echo and reverb and, in the case of the latter, looping patterns to create repetition. For Reeves, the computer is a tool used in a practical sense, not an inherent part of his filmmaking. He is careful to maintain the integrity of the handmade sounds and sees great potential for future experimentation. "There is much to be done as one of the primitive animated filmmaking techniques merges with modern technology."

Reeves is obviously deeply devoted to his craft, as anyone involved in cameraless animation would have to be. What gives particular cause for optimism about his future films is his magnanimous point of view in which everything is potentially useful, from computer technology to stick-on shapes. In preparing for this article, I asked Reeves a number of questions which he responded to via fax. Each fax was handwritten, and by the third one he apologized if he was not making sense, explaining that he was distracted by the look of the letters in the words. He couldn't help wondering what they would sound like on film. ●