

# Moving Pictures

Directed and narrated by Colin Low,  
written by Colin Low and Boyce Richardson,  
produced by Marc Zannis,  
National Film Board of Canada, 47m, 2000



A man looks at the world. The world looks back. Somewhere in that exchange an image is created. The opening shot of Colin Low's *Moving Pictures* is a close-up of Low's face peering directly at the camera from behind a magnifying glass and glasses: two planes of glass mediating his vision of the world beyond him. It is an arresting and telling image, for this film is a philosophical investigation of the relationship between observation and action, perception and technology, mediated images of reality and reality itself. Made by one of Canada's veteran masters of the short film and pioneers of experimental approaches to documentary form, it also has affiliations with recent examples of essay films made by directors such as Oliver Hockenhull, Peter Mettler, Patricia Gruben and others. Much like his earlier films, *Moving Pictures* offers a meditation on the act of looking and on the motivations for and the consequences of the apparently irresistible process of making images. In this sense, *Moving Pictures* also represents a summation of Colin Low's remarkable career in Canadian cinema.

Growing up in rural southern Alberta, Colin Low initially studied art and found his way into film. Hired by Norman McLaren, Low began his career by drawing illustrative maps for educational films at the NFB. He soon became a key figure in the Board's fabled Unit B documentary section. Renowned for its formally inventive approach to documentary practice, and for its reflective and philosophical tendencies, Unit B is where Low made such acclaimed films as *Corral*, *City of Gold*, *Universe* and many others. He also conceived of the multi-chamber film installation *Labyrinth*, with Roman Kroitor, for Expo 67, and was involved in the development and production of IMAX films. Throughout his distinguished filmography, Low has struggled with the technological means and meaning of looking at the world and taking pictures of it.

*Moving Pictures* re-examines that struggle in relation to the theme of the role of the artist and the significance and impact of the images that artist creates. Low's interest in this complex subject is concentrated on the figure of 17th-century French artist, Jacques Callot. Looking closely at the detailed etchings of Callot's work on the catastrophic effects of the Thirty Years War, Low expands his field of vision to include an examination of his own work, of the role of the artist in wartime, and of the epistemological implications of representational images in Western culture. Seeing Callot as a prototype of a documentary filmmaker and as an artist both apart from and implicated in the carnage of his era, Low then ponders the evolution of representations of war in art, photography, cinema and

television. It is an evolution, Low argues, that is neither innocent nor impartial: the dissemination of knowledge through artistic representations of war helped to popularize it. From the 17th-century European wars to the battles for North America up to the Gulf War, image-making technology has, in an eerie correspondence, kept pace with weapons technology, culminating in the merging of representation and assault in "smart bombs" that produce immediate pictures of their own devastating trajectories.

Weaving together autobiography, the work of Callot, the history of North American collision between Europeans and aboriginal peoples, and his own personal sense of time's passage, Low's 47-minute film veers close to collapse under the sheer weight of its ambitions. Inside the entanglements of the film's dense agenda of aesthetic and political concerns, there is considerable unevenness. As one example, curiously, Low chooses to announce his themes in a pre-Unit B-style voice-over rather than allow his "moving pictures" themselves to be suggestive and connotative. Moreover, his musings on life, time, landscape, media and technology are, at times, distilled and illuminating, but equally banal and obvious (is it necessary, for instance, for Low to ask: "How much progress have we made as a civilization?"). The connection between technologies of image-making and the propagation of war and war technologies is a gnarled and fascinating area of investigation. Low's film is a fine beginning, but we want it to go further. In this sense, given Low's involvement in its development, why is there no confrontation with IMAX? Where is the examination of its colossal presence in those broader cultural processes of fetishizing technology with the technologies of image-making?

Perhaps we ask too much. Perhaps we demand answers from a film of questions and from what is, finally, a very personal piece of cinema. Indeed, *Moving Pictures* often has an elegiac tone and feels like a valediction: poignant, direct, perceptive, unfinished, acutely aware that time is limited. There is a need to say simply and in bravely unadorned fashion things that must be said about war and technology, as well as our role in the relationship between the two. In addition, there is a need to account for one's life as an artist, for Low here and there dabs the introspective colours of personal memory and family history onto this melancholy charcoal sketch of a film. Perhaps more accurately understood as notes toward a film than a fully realized film itself, *Moving Pictures* remains, in its quiet and awkward way, a forceful reminder of the rich, troubling complexity of the seemingly simple act of looking at the world. ●