

Paul Driessen



*The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg* (2000)

# SEEING ISN'T BELIEVING

BY MARC GLASSMAN

## THE FILM WORLD OF PAUL

With Norman McLaren as its father, it is hardly surprising that Canadian animation has proven to be rich in abstract art. That's been the case since René Jodoin started collaborating with McLaren during the Second World War and it continues today with the work of such artists as the B.C. indie Richard Reeves and the newly liberated former NFB executive Pierre Hébert. Funny animated tales arrived late in Canada and were often given short shrift until Nelvana's rise to acclaim in the late 1970s and '80s. It's the rare animator in Canada who has been able to bridge the gap between storytelling and conceptual art. One of those few, and arguably the best, is Paul Driessen, a peripatetic Dutch-Canadian whose work is as divided as his national roots.

For someone who works alone or with just a few close collaborators, Driessen has made an astonishing number of

films in a wildly diverse group of genres over the past 30 years. Among his more than 25 pieces can be found such accomplished works as *An Old Box*, a heartfelt Christmas tale; *The Writer*, a black comedy about mortality in the Middle Ages; *Elbowing*, a lively parable on non-conformity; *Spotting a Cow*, a free-associative visual comedy; and three split-screen stories, *On Land, at Sea and in the Air*, *The End of the World in Four Seasons* and *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*.

Driessen has created an imaginative world all his own. It is populated with ravenous, vulture-like birds, immense spotted cows, a wide variety of aggressive cats, ships that always seem to list and capsize, huge and very nasty fish, annoying flies, spiders and bloblike romantic but sexless men and women. They are the stuff of comedy and Driessen has taken full advantage of them to make his films accessible to the public.



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Regarding Driessen as a mere entertainer, though, would be a grave mistake. Although he has made some very funny pieces, Driessen's work is generally quite acetic and refined. In his dry way, his humour is comparable to that of Buster Keaton or Jacques Tati. Like those two, his slapstick is precise, almost mathematical, and many of the jokes are based on visual puns or occur off-camera. As a filmmaker, Paul Driessen is more comparable to Michael Snow than Tex Avery. Like Snow, and to a lesser extent Keaton and Tati, Driessen is concerned with the mechanics of what appears on the screen.

His latest film, *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*, depicts a tragedy, but it does so while using the





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split-screen format that has become his turf in recent years. Here he has created a diptych, with one screen showing what is really happening to a poor little rich boy and his unresponsive parents, while the other suggests the depths of the lad's emotional life. We are rarely asked to care about anyone in Driessen's films; not so with the boy.

We follow his misadventures at school and home and are asked to identify with the lad's travails. He has no friends and is ignored by his parents. His true existence is in his dream life where he lives out wild pulp-fiction adventures involving kidnapping, violence and attacks in the desert. Up to this point in his career, Driessen has never dealt with the psychological content of his material. By moving into the realm of subjectivity, he has given himself new challenges.

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Visually, Driessen has had to create two worlds: one real and the other fantastic. He reverses normal expectations by making the actual world full of bright colours while rendering the boy's dream state in a dark palette of black and gun-metal grey. In order to show the change in the two screens, which are occasionally the same when the boy isn't daydreaming, the lad's face is shown to move, twitch and shake before his fantasy world is evoked. There is no interplay between the panels in this film, as the two worlds only collide when the boy has to confront reality.

Driessen has made a huge step forward with *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*. He has been able to marry his formal concerns within a narrative framework before but never with this emotional impact. The film would not be nearly as effective without the split-screen that allows us insights into the boy's psychological state. It's clear that Driessen can now evoke character as well as the comedic situations that are so brilliantly set up in many of his films.

What is most surprising about *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg* is that it is a work by someone who could easily be playing it safe. Though he looks 10 years younger, Driessen is 60 years old, an age when some artists would be looking backward, reassessing and refining the kind of work they have already created. While that might have been the case with Driessen's previous film, the Oscar-nominated *3 Misses*, it certainly wasn't with the film that preceded it, *The End of the World in Four Seasons*. *3 Misses* was a very funny take on silent film clichés—there's even a woman tied to a train track in it—but *The End of the World* is an eye-popping masterpiece and technically the most difficult project that Driessen has ever conceived.

The film is divided in two ways, by seasonal chapter headings and on the screen. Using Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* to announce each chapter, Driessen sets up a framework in which eight drawings are placed in three rows. Like a storyboard gone awry, the drawings are then animated. While some of the illustrations start to work in tandem with others, many remain separate. All of the graphics for each chapter refer to typical events in a season. The seasons themselves are set up with proper colours – orange and grey for autumn; blues and browns for summer; whites and reds for winter; and yellow and black and white for spring – while the illustrations are by Driessen, and they were organized through a computer compositor by an assistant.

Sound confusing? It isn't, thanks to Driessen's sure hand as a designer and storyteller. Take Spring for instance. Of the eight drawings (four on top, three in the middle and one on the bottom of the screen), one is of a bird in a tree; directly below that is pictured a man in a kitchen with an egg cup. A huge egg forms the centre middle drawing while below it are two dogs getting to know each other. Just above the egg is a nocturnal outdoor scene and next to that is a drawing of a man standing next to a door illuminated by moonlight. To the right of the man is a drawing of a bedroom. Below that is another room suffused with darkness. Dawn breaks and, magically, the drawings come to life.

The bird in the tree lays a small egg that plummets through its drawing and lands in the man's egg cup. The dogs bark. Mosquitoes and bees buzz through several spring scenes. A gigantic bird is born, breaking through the huge egg's shell. In the darkened room, a cat emerges, opening drapes onto the world. A man rings a doorbell while another sleeps in a bed. Night arrives and things quiet down. The next day, the cat becomes obsessed with pursuing birds. It grabs the huge bird by its feet and finds the whole house lifted up and dropped, with a thump, on the ground. Unscathed, the cat bolts through two drawings, eating the small egg before the man with the egg cup can stop him. The dogs smile at each other while the man ringing the doorbell is finally grabbed and taken inside. The paper drawings crumble into balls. Spring has sprung. And that's only a quarter of what goes on in this charming film. While setting himself immense formal problems in creating this work, Driessen never neglects his viewers. Each season is evoked with appropriate details and outbursts of comic violence meant to satisfy the most visceral of watchers.

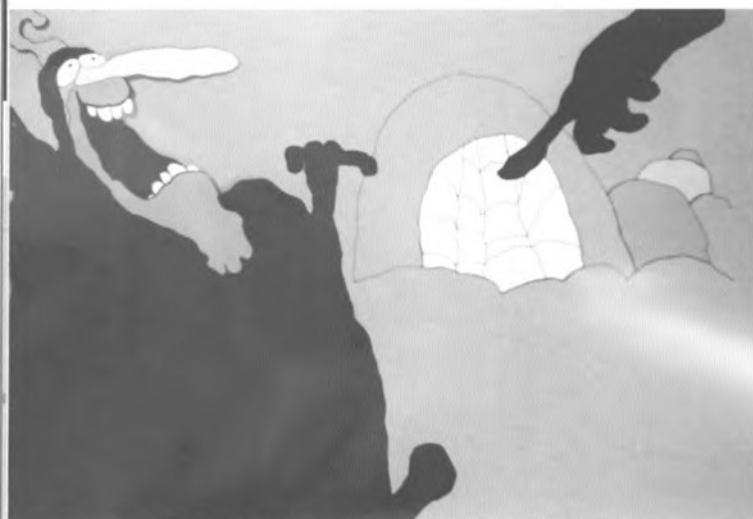


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Both *The End of the World in Four Seasons* and *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg* were created in Canada and produced by Marcy Page for the NFB. An animator herself, Page is uniquely suited to work with Driessen. Clearly, she understands his concerns and through her, his second period of work at the NFB has been particularly fruitful. Page's presence fits a pattern in Driessen's work. Wherever he goes, this travelling Dutchman has been able to find able support from willing and helpful producers. In his early period with the NFB, in the 1970s, he always received encouragement and protection through the good offices of René Jodoin, then the head of the French animation unit. At Radio-Canada, in the late 1970s, Hubert Tison augmented an animation department made famous by the work of Frédéric Back (*Crac!*, *The Man Who Planted Trees*) through the occasional work by Driessen. In Holland, from the 1970s through the '90s, there has been a meaningful collaboration and friendship between Driessen and his producer, the inimitable Nico Crama.

that his future was in animation at the NFB. It took a while for his ambition to be realized but after making one film in Holland, he was invited by animator Gerald Potterton to work in Canada. Soon afterwards, Driessen joined Jodoin's unit which included such auteurs as Kaj Pindal, fellow Dutchman Co Hoedeman and Czech émigré Bretislav Pojar. There he was able to work in an atmosphere of artistic freedom constrained only by the NFB's occasional demand for a didactic interpretation of the brilliant, often abstract work that was being created on the screen.

While working with Jodoin, Driessen created his first major work, *Cat's Cradle*. Jodoin liked Driessen's graphic concept for the piece but felt that the original premise lacked coherence. Urged to rework it, Driessen came back with a cleverly structured scenario in which a spider's web transforms a chameleon-like creature into a voracious devourer of everything it encounters. Like a jazz musician, Driessen plays endless variations on what a line can turn



*Cat's Cradle* (1974)



*An Old Box* (1975)

However, it was George Dunning, an ex-NFber and the director of *Yellow Submarine*, who changed the course of Driessen's career, and life, by inviting him to come to London and work on that legendary animated feature. You can see elements of Driessen's comic character designs in the look of the Blue Meanies, while the animation of the LOVE glove is a pure example of his emerging style. While collaborating on *Yellow Submarine*, the young Dutchman heard great tales of the NFB and Norman McLaren from Dunning who, like Jodoin, had worked at the NFB's nascent animation unit during the Second World War.

When *Yellow Submarine* was completed, Driessen decided

into, from a dog's leash to a puppeteer's strings. The notion of the cat's cradle, a game played with yarn where two children help each other to create stringed patterns on their hands of ever-growing complexity, creates an entry point into the proceedings.

In 1975, Paul Driessen began to develop a hankering for his previous life in Holland. His first wife had left Canada with their two children and returned home, a factor that certainly entered his calculations when he started to work on projects with Nico Crama. Over the next 15 years, Driessen would spend a great deal of his time in Holland, helping to raise his son Kaj and daughter Annick. The films he made during this time are some of his best.

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*David*, the first Crama production, is in some ways a quintessential Driessen piece. Since the leading man, David, is so small that one can't see him, the film revolves around questions of perception, an ongoing concern of the artist. One hears David railing about his enemies, mainly birds that would like to eat him. Driessen does show us his shadow and sticks him with a nasty inking problem that trails him through the second part of the film; but mainly David isn't there. After *The Killing of an Egg*, another film with Crama, was completed, Driessen returned to Canada and worked on an animated title sequence for Tison at Radio-Canada and a script for the NFB. He has continued that pattern of movement since, working in Canada and Holland with great regularity.

In 1980, Driessen created one of his finest works, and his first split-screen effort, *On Land, at Sea and in the Air*. The film is organized as a triptych. On the left panel, as the piece begins, a man is sleeping in a bedroom; in the middle, a bird

bucolic and funny while raising awareness of what can inspire a good yarn.

During the late 1980s, Paul Driessen created short pieces for Vancouver's Expo 86, made another brilliant Dutch film, *The Writer*, and embarked on a teaching career. He has taught at a German art college in Kassel for nearly 15 years and his students have won two Oscars: Christoff Lavenstein for *Balance* in 1989 and Thomas Stellmach and Tyron Montgomery for *Quest* in 1996. Though he is disinclined to discuss his teaching methodology and is characteristically modest about any influence he might have had on his students, the facts are indisputable. Both films show Driessen characteristics, particularly *Balance*, which is a conceptual puzzle fully in keeping with the maker of *Cat's Cradle* and *Spotting a Cow*.

Paul Driessen is leading a wonderfully layered life. He has married again, this time to Diane, a Canadian painter. The two split their time between Montreal and the south of



*An Old Box*: A heartfelt Christmas tale.

is on a branch in a tree; and in the right panel, a boat is sailing in the water. As the intricate tale unfolds, the man wakes up and shoots at the bird while the boat runs into bad weather, nearly capsizing. He encounters Noah's Ark and Jesus, while the boat somehow remains afloat. Numerous subplots unfold until Driessen resolves the film by filling the three panels with the man in a bath with his toys.

Three years later, Driessen made another conceptual charmer with *Spotting a Cow*. Roving over what appears to be abstract space, the excited narrator tells us a new story about each unique dark clump that the audience sees on the screen. Only at the end is it revealed that the views have all been of a cow's spots. A storyteller's delight, this film is



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France, while Driessen also travels to Holland and, of course, Kassel. It's a complicated but rewarding existence for a filmmaker who loves to bisect the screen and create multiple scenarios. If there's an artist in animation more deserving of the title "auteur," I can't imagine who it might be. Driessen is it—the artist as comedian, philosopher and conceptual thinker.

TAKE ONE