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★★★★

EXPO FILMS

... the good, the bad
and the simply banal

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Take a run down Whistler Mountain in a space ship, travel to Prague by balloon, visit Quebec, Singapore, Hong Kong, Russia, all by film or slide show at Expo 86.

Going to a world fair means going to films. It is one of the peculiarities of the species. You go line up for half an hour or more to see some exotic place and wind up in a dark theatre watching a film or slide show, or combination of the two, sometimes with live action as well and/or laser lights.

Some adventures are in the newest film techniques including the best three dimensional film ever made. If you see them all, you'll have seen Showscan, Imax, Tri-Max, Omnimax and Circlevision. You may observe that some of the best films have been done in old fashioned ways. (The funniest is simply a collection of old footage in black and white of early attempts at powered movement.) You may also observe that some of the very best films are among the shortest (see Alberta's).

You will have seen slide shows run by computers, slide shows mixed with laser light shows, movies projected on the inside of satellite dishes, slides and films projected on smoke, 3-D films and holavision.

If you tend to notice such things, you will become aware that Canadians are among the best film makers in the world. (Especially when compared to the Russians.

The Soviet Union may beat us at hockey — and one of their films shows them scoring against Team Canada — but at film-making they are back in the 1960s.)

About the new technology:

SHOWSCAN was developed by Douglas Trumbull, the man behind the special effects in Close Encounters of the Third Kind. It provides a high resolution (exceptionally sharp) picture using 70 mm film. See Showscan in the B.C. Discovery pavilion and the Canada Pavilion.

Imax was first used at Expo '67. It is another high resolution process the National Film Board chose for its new 3-D film. You won't get a headache and the kids will be grabbing for the teddy bears floating above their heads. See it in the CN Theatre in the Canada pavilion.

Tri-max was "invented for Expo 86" say the inventors, Bob Rogers and Company of Burbank, Calif. The triple screen is more than 30 metres wide. See it in the B.C. Challenge pavilion.

Omnimax is the huge screen version of Imax that wraps around and over you at Expo Centre.

Circlevision, which surrounds the viewer, has been a world fair staple since the Canadian telephone companies presented it at Expo 67. They have a new film in the same process for Expo 86.

The films themselves, and what we thought of them:

● Air Canada pavilion, "Kaleidoscope"

There are some nice things in this curving matrix of 65 screens controlled by 200 computerized slide projectors. Air Canada is commemorating Trans-Canada Airline's first commercial flight (Vancouver-Seattle, Sept. 1, 1937). A gleaming real vintage plane is right beneath you, the twin props roaring while the screen evokes magnificent skylines. Lasers streaking to the screen erupt in photographed lightning flashes on contact. Then it becomes an Air Canada spiel with sucky shots of people's farewells. The pop-rock music is like styro-foam pellets and wonders often, "what's so good about good-bye?" Well, we'll tell you. It just means God be with you. 15 minutes. ★ ½

● Alberta pavilion, four short subjects

An Expo sleeper, one super film, a couple of good ones and a so-so. The Albertans get their messages across quickly; all films are less than five minutes long. The quickie at the entrance to the pavilion shows how the Indians slaughtered bison by driving them over a cliff (★★★); the so-so (★★ plus) is a wide screen cliché of a stunt plane stunting above the foothills; then there's a ride around a circular screen with a couple of rodeo chuckwagon drivers (★★★). Careful, now, or you'll walk by one of the best films at Expo. It's in the pavilion's children's play area and is a charming little piece of a little girl dreaming of becoming a ballerina

— and dancing with some of the biggest roughnecks at the Alberta Tar Sands. Filmed on location at Fort McMurray to the music of Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite. It's even got a puppy in it. Three minutes. ★★★★★

● Australia pavilion, three films in three theatres

Australia makes a hard sell for tourism, especially for 1988 when it celebrates its 200th birthday and hosts the next Expo. You have to sit on the floor of the three theatres, but the carpets are thick and comfortable. Actor Mel Gibson, opera singer Joan Sutherland and the country's Expo commissioner John Landy (the former miller) all tell you why you should come visit. Twenty minutes for the lot. ★★

● British Columbia, a "Zargon"

The innovative Showscan technique takes the audience down a ski run inside a red ball space ship character. Vancouver child actress Fairuza Balk (who starred in Return to Oz) is taking the ship, Zargon, on a tour of her home province. Zargon goes home undoubtedly thinking it never rains in a wondrously beautiful place populated solely by white Anglo-Saxons. Inoffensive, slick as Disney, basically well done. 18 minutes. Be prepared for a long line-up. ★★ ★★

● B.C. pavilion, Challenge Theatre, "A Day in the Work Life of B.C."

Another flawless look at a flawless place. Would be greatly improved by a storm at sea, or some evidence of the creative arts, but there's nary a ripple on the waters of this view of B.C. life. 15 minutes. ★★ ★ for technique, no content.

● Canada pavilion, "This is My Home"

An eight-minute look at a day in the life of Canada, a culling of 3,000 pictures from 30,000 taken last July 1. Hong Kong does much the same, using computers to run a slick slide show, but does it better. Eight minutes. ★★ ★

● Canada pavilion, "Transitions"

Collin Low of the National Film Board's marriage of three dimensional techniques with the Imax system is a success. Probably the best 3-D movie ever, arguably the best film at Expo. 20 minutes. Expect a very long line-up. ★★ ★★ (Would have earned six stars if the technique had been used to tell a real story.)

● Canada pavilion, Teleglobe Canada Theatre, "The Taming of the Demons"

Needs a warning. Fierce scenes of a witch doctor will frighten small children who won't understand the connection between prehistoric demonology and modern technology. Nine screens, a spinning hoop and 10 projectors. 20 minutes. You'll have to line up. ★★ ★★

● Canadian National pavilion, LocoMotion

The imagination ends with the title. Actor Gordon Pinsent plays a variety of roles explaining the significance and the greatness of CN. 14 minutes. ★★

● Canadian Pacific pavilion, "The Rainbow War"

Too cute by half, but it's an excess that can be tolerated at a world fair. A love story with a happy ending that teaches us a world of different colored people is better than a world of one color alone. Mixing the colors is fun, especially if the colors are red, yellow and blue and armies are all armed with colored paint. 20 minutes. Expect a line-up. ★★ ★★

● Czechoslovakia pavilion, "Actorscope"

Part of the audience is loaded into balloon gondolas and taken overseas to explore Prague as the ingenious Czechs continue to make films almost as well as they play hockey. After leaving the gondolas (that is, the theatre) the audience gets to choose from three television tours of the Czech capital. Something for adults, and kids. 11 minutes. ★★ ★★

● European Community pavilion, "Europe in Motion"

A travelogue from the 1960s. Looks like the Europeans are trying to make their fascinating experiment in economic unity appear

as dull as possible so no one will notice them. They've been working at free trade for a generation and they should have told us more. 13 minutes. ★★

● Expo Centre, "A Freedom to Move"

One of the most popular films at Expo, with long lineups. Short on content but huge in impact. And disorienting. The omnimax screen, which is nine times as large as that of the average movie theatre, wraps partly around the spherical theatre. You feel like a mote in world of giants, and when the rocket takes off, you seem to be right under it on the launching pad. Sit well to the rear. Front row seats will leave you staring straight up. 23 minutes. ★★ ★

● General Motors pavilion, "Spirit Lodge"

With a thunderclap, the five doors of a simulated Kwakiutl "big house" fling open, admitting you to the theatre where you see, behind glass, the story-teller and his "fire." What appears to be mythical beings conjured out of woods-moke by the storyteller are holographic images projected on water-based mist, but they're still magical. A stunning show that for once makes a felicitous connection with the theme of transportation: there is the ancient West Coast Indian myth of the magic canoe that could be propelled anywhere in an instant on the thrust of one stroke. Eight minutes. Expect long line-ups. ★★ ★★

● Hong Kong pavilion, "Twenty four Hours in the Life of Hong Kong."

The ultimate in vacation slide shows. Sixty-six projectors, 7,000 slides combined with live dancers. The liveliest nine minutes you are likely to spend at Expo. ★★ ★★

● Kenya pavilion, "Balloon Safari Flight"

A neat idea, taking a movie of the African veldt from a balloon gondola and then projecting it onto the floor and letting spectators imagine they are on a balloon ride. Pictures are a bit blurry, though. For this film to work it would have to be much, much better than anything on public television. It isn't. Five minutes. ★★

● Northwest Territories pavilion, "The Emerging North: In Search of Balance"

One of the best. Not high-tech, just high-art. Ten unforgettable minutes that make a third of the second largest country in the world intimate. It's a non-narrative succession of images: a close-up of the face of a dozing fox; a shot of a hare that makes it seem more a spring powered mechanism than a cute rabbit; a fleeting heat spell where people only wade at the beach; a city council meeting with ear-phoned native representatives looking like NATO officials; the shock of a felled reindeer; children learning the Inuit alphabet on a computer; gulls sweeping like a blizzard down a crevasse. The images are full of tension and so is the haunting music, not needing words or an uplifting theme to tie Expo and the NWT all together. This place just is. Expect long line-ups. ★★★★★

● Ontario pavilion, "Reflections"

Come on, who can take 3-D seriously? Well, minute by minute in this film, you almost do, although you might tend to forget it as soon as you leave the theatre. (Long queues to get in. Expect an hour.) They give you flimsy-looking shades that work just fine even over your glasses. Everything on the screen seems to be happening two inches before the face of the people directly in front of you: the Canada geese's wings seem to be grazing their heads and they seem to be getting drenched by splashing porpoises. Fun, but how much of Ontario do you recall? 20 minutes. ★★★

● Oregon pavilion, Oregon trails."

Only marginally better than your best friend's "how I spent my summer vacation" slide show (but mercifully shorter). Oregon's presentation makes the state look like a postcard in training. Come on guys, a sunset is a sunset is a sunset. A bevy of cliches — and no high-tech to redeem them. Eight minutes. ★★

● Pavillon of Promise, "Crossroads Communications, Inc."

God goes to Disney World to spread the word. The story of Creation in 35 minutes, divided into three sequels in three separate theatres, and you have to pick yourself up and hit every one of them. You might whisper sacrilegiously, "it's all done with mirrors," and you'd be right. With headphones on, you gape through glass down into the pit of a cubicle lined with mirrors

that kaleidoscopically reveals a tacky '60s light show, complete with a couple of writhing dancers (Adam and Eve), film footage of darling children and their theories about God, and some indescribable narration. Faith is faith, but this one you really have to see to believe. Just take the headphones off for a second and listen to the machinery. ★

● People's Republic of China, "Transportation in China"

So pathetic, it's almost endearing. Low-low-tech, as you can surmise with a glance at the plywood show schedule impaled on a nail and the dingy curtain at the entrance. Four small screens with rear-projection offer 15 minutes of desperate generalities on scratched, washed-out slides taken with little view to pleasing composition. In panoramic shots covering the four screens, the edges don't even meet: jagged topography,

China. Nevertheless, the soundtrack does valiantly with a disco *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. ★

● Quebec pavilion, "Transformations in Transportation."

Quebec mysteriously sets out to destroy its image as a lively, exciting Francophone province and almost succeeds. This production says Quebec is really heavy industry, monolithic hydro dams, and a symphony orchestra playing Bolero. There is no ice hockey. Forty eight projectors and laser lights. 15 minutes. ★★

● The Roundhouse pavilion, sponsored by Esso, "Viva Edisons"

Produced by Jaromir Hnik of Studio Shapes of Czechoslovakia. A montage of old footage of transportation inventions, the airplanes that flapped their wings, the rocket-powered bicycles that exploded. A few laughs, a modest message as one of the hapless pioneers of pre-flight slowly fades into Neil Armstrong stepping down to the moon. Eight minutes. ★★★

● Saskatchewan pavilion, Horizons Theatre (untitled)

This sentimental film shows a people unafraid of laughing at themselves, their summer plagues of bugs and thunderstorms, generally having a good time and wondering why all the people who have abandoned the province haven't come home. All former Saskatchewanians will go to this film, which may make it the most popular at Expo. 15 minutes. ★★★

● Singapore pavilion, "Surprising Singapore: A Magic Place of Worlds"

Visit the land of the Raffles Hotel bar, Somerset Maugham, and apparently clean beaches. Thirty-three projectors and a circular screen. Eight minutes. ★★★

● Telecom Canada pavilion, "Portraits of Canada"

A disappointment because the provincial phone companies have given us a new film — relying on technology developed for Montreal's Expo '67. (Imagine the uproar if they'd used 1948 technology in 1967.) The film is better than the 1967 issue, however, with stories to illustrate the landscapes, a bicycle race through Quebec, a Christmas visit to Saskatchewan. 18 minutes. ★★★

Star ratings

For handy reference, our two critics have rated the films and visual presentations at Expo, awarding them from one to five stars. Here's what the stars represent:

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Fair
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Outstanding

● Union of Soviet Socialist Republics pavillion, "Animals at Play" (In 3-D)

See this one only if you want to compare the advances the National Film Board and Ontario have made over 1950s three dimensional technology. Your head will ache, the cardboard stereo glasses will fall off, you'll get tired of watching cute foxes and kittens tumbling and roughhousing. All the Soviet films are too long. The air conditioned theatre was half empty when this one eventually ended. 30 minutes. ★ (for the butterflies floating above the audience.)

● Union of Soviet Socialist Republics pavillion, (World in Motion)

Much better than the 3-D effort. A bit of everything: horse-drawn sleighs in a Russian winter, rockets to the moon, interviews with a Moscow transit driver, a telephone operator, a freighter captain, a cosmonaut, all in favor of peace. This is the Soviet Union's major Expo film. It is too earnest, too unrelenting, too long. 30 minutes. ★★★, barely. (For something more interesting on your way to the line-up to the space capsule, take in the film about recent and contemporary Soviet art outside the main pavillion theatre.)

● United Nations pavillion, "Island in Space"

The earth is a small planet, an island of beauty and abundance to be nurtured and protected, says this audio visual presentation. Hard to argue with. Harder even to give this 10-minute work more than ★★★. But catch the little cartoon shown outside the theatre that compresses mankind's greatest advances into a single year. The discovery of fire was in January, the wheel in November, radio and television early this morning. Less than 10 minutes and a solid ★★★ plus.

● Washington pavillion, "Northwest Passage"

These folks from down south are real nice neighbors and there's no harm in humoring them in their belief they live in the northwest. Top marks for bringing a moving walkway, called a "travolator", to take pavillion visitors past an interesting slide and film show about their state, but Canadian school kids looking for information about the other "Northwest Passage" will be confused. Seven minutes. ★★★

● Yukon pavillion, "Out of Silence"

A slide show on a big screen, selected from photos taken by 100 Yukon photographers. It is heavy on Yukon wildlife and scenery. Some genuine views of aurora borealis (Quebec hokes its shots of aurora with laser lights.) 12½ minutes. ★★★ plus.