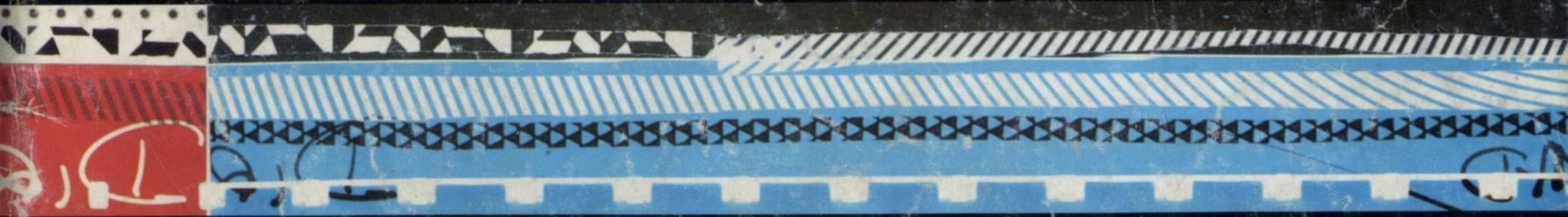
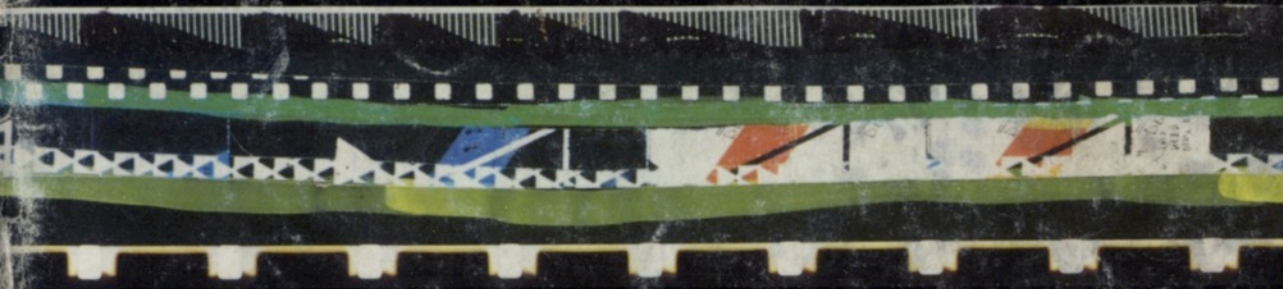


CANTRILLS FILMNOTES

nos. 61, 62



The films of

Roxlee



AROUND Manila Rox Lee (or Roque Lee) is well known as Roxlee, maker of animated and collage films and comic strip artist, and a retrospective show of his films was given at the 1990 Quezon City Super 8 Film Festival. The introductory note in the catalogue refers to him as 'a hero of the underground cinema', with his 'cynical humour' and his works as 'so raw they will make you view life anew.'

We spoke with Roxlee under the trees at the side of the swimming pool at the Mowelfund Film Institute . . .

We noticed your comic strip, 'Cesar Asar' in the Manila Bulletin. I gather there is quite a tradition of comic strip art in the Philippines — there are five local strips in the Bulletin, for example, all written in Tagalog. But yours we can easily follow, as there is no dialogue. Did your work in comics precede the filmmaking?

Yes, it did. The Bulletin has been publishing my strip for nine years now. They pay very little — 70 pesos per strip! (About \$A 4.50!) It started at P 15, then they increased it to P 30, P 50, now it's P 70. But I enjoy doing comic strips. If it was syndicated overseas to, say, 25 papers I'd be paid enough, but just appearing in one paper, you don't get much. Eventually I'd like to publish them in a book form. I'm working on a new comic strip, 'Santigwar'.

Can you tell us something of your background? How old are you now?

I'm 39 now. I studied architecture at the National University of the Philippines, but I got fed up with straight lines, so I started

making comic strips. I didn't work as an architect, just did some projects at university. Then in 1983 I wrote a film script for an 8 minute film directed by Ted Arago, **Tronong Puti**, or The White Throne. Worshippers are shown offering flowers to a toilet bowl and there's a priest in a black hood, chanting. The idea is that the lavatory is more beneficial to society than the bomb — I'm comparing the two things. There's reference to the environment with shots of car exhaust pipes, and people covering their noses from the pollution integrated with the scenes of the priest and girls throwing flowers.

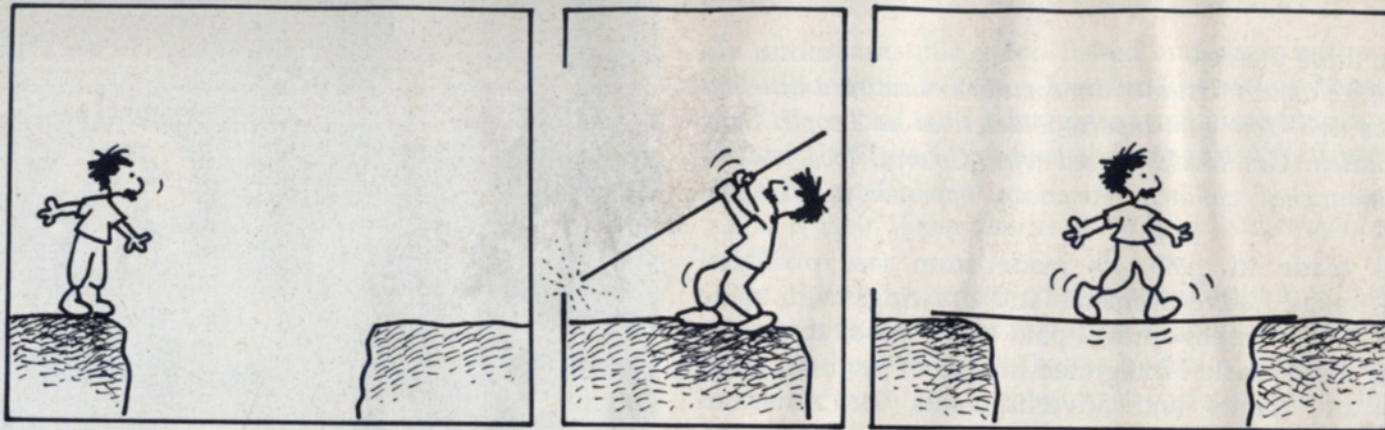
By suggesting that the lavatory is a subject for veneration compared with the bomb, you're very much subverting the whole notion of warfare.

Before your filmmaking were you working as an artist?

Yes, a layout artist for a music magazine called 'Jingle Chord-book', I did paste-ups, layout and some cartoons. I used to paint as well, but since I started filmmaking I don't have time to paint! But I might return to painting in the future.

And what made you want to make films? Was your filmmaking a personal direction, or were you introduced to it through involvement with a group?

Although I was introduced to the possibility of film through a Mowelfund film workshop, I think it was really a personal direction. I was already 30 when I started making films, so it was time



Cesar Asar, by Roxlee

to change direction and attempt something new, and super 8 was very accessible. I just wanted to release some of my personal hang-ups and views.

After doing the script for the first film I worked in animation and made *The Great Smoke*, a satire on nuclear destruction, with animated drawings. I didn't use cell animation, or a pegbar, but drew it in notepads, clipped them in position and filmed them — just cheap materials! I shot it in a garage, with an ordinary super 8 camera on a tripod, with the artwork on a small chair. The sound is fast rock music — Pink Floyd.

These simple techniques often result in a more direct, personal statement than if it were mediated through industry techniques. As well as the animated line drawings, the technique I found interesting in that was the use of wet ink forming images under the camera, and running a little — it must be hard to control. It was a metaphor for the bodies dissolving in the explosion, and also for blood.

Yes, I had to shoot it while it was still wet. At the time I was doing it I was very angry about the world situation, and I put my anger into the film. These days I am less angry! I want to make more serene films, about nature perhaps.

Tell us about about *Tatlong "A"* (*Three A's*), made in 1984. Is that live action or animation?

It is live action. I revised it in 1987, blowing it up to 16mm on the optical printer, and put in some optical effects. It became the film called *Lizard, or How to Perform in Front of a Reptile*.

It shows a man beating his head against a wall, and a lizard is watching him.

It comments on religious fanaticism and idolatry. Scenes in a church of people lining up to wipe the feet of a reclining Christ figure and praying are integrated in a fast, pixillated way. At this time we were brainwashed with pixillation, but now I don't like using it any more — I prefer normal movement!

The program note for Tao at Kambing says 'Goat eats Grass. Man eats grass. Goats don't eat men. Men eat goats. Men should only eat grass. Goats live by grass alone. Men and goats are the same.'

This is a light comic piece, not very serious! A silent film. I shot it with a friend who likes to live in the country, it has a countryside setting. I positioned him face to face with his neighbour's goat, and he eats a little grass and flowers! I don't know if you've heard a goat being killed, but it's like a child crying, a very human sound. And they eat dogs here sometimes, in remote areas,



The Great Smoke, by Roxlee

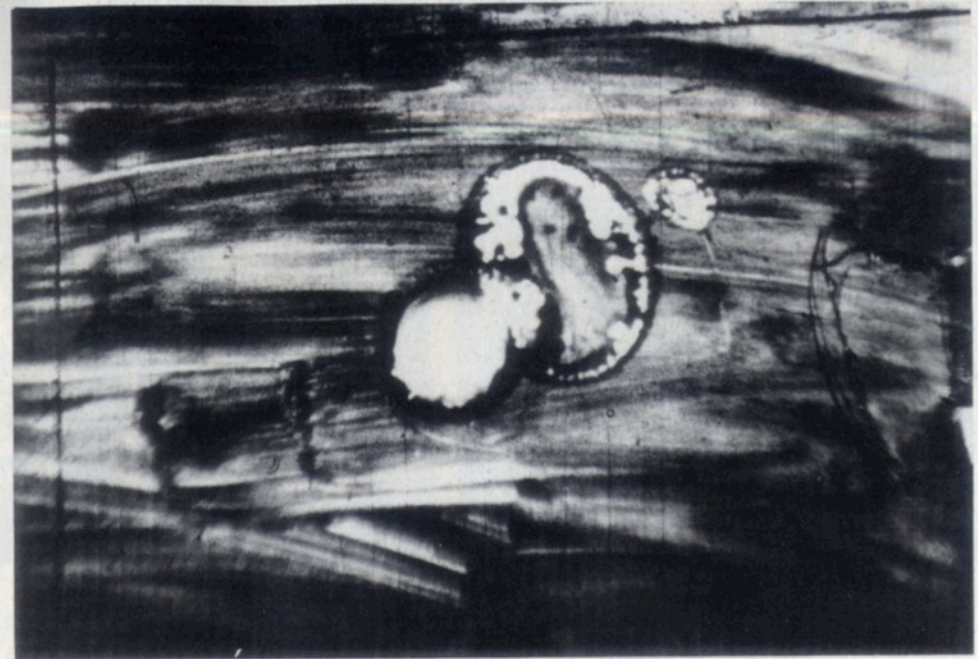
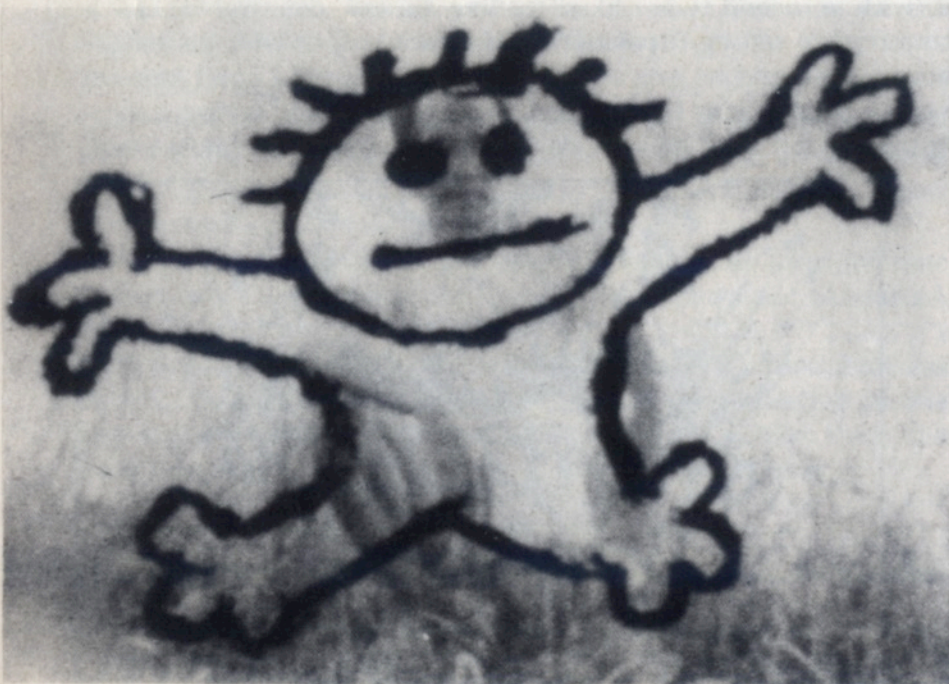
so the film's on these themes.

Your work has a unique mixture of dry comedy and satire, a little bitter, but funny as well. Your film Inserts is described as 'People. Cars. Fast Cars. Pollution. Gas Mask. Barbed wire. Colorful food. Advertisements. Malnourished children. American imperialism. Religion. Statues. Saints.'

Inserts was made in 1985, it's made from fast pixillated photographed images, advertisements and drawings with some animation. It has my nephew in it, I paid him 5 pesos to appear naked, wearing a gas mask! I integrated images of fast cars, religious artifacts and saints and advertisements for American products. For example a Milo ad. is related to a shot of a malnourished child — there are lots of American food products here, but many Filipino children are hungry. It's a collage. The sound is recorded locally — Filipino women singing religious songs.

ABCD is an animated adult's alphabet, again combining children's and adult themes in a satirical way, with a music track. You illustrate the words, I remember, for example, 'F is for Fart!'

I think this is the laziest film I ever did! I just integrated some of my work very quickly to enter a competition organised by the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, CCP. During the Marcos regime



this organisation was called Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, ECP, but after Marcos it was reformed as CCP, and it now conducts the annual film and video competition.

Your brother, Monlee, has a credit on this film. What was his contribution? I notice he also is jointly credited on your comic strips.

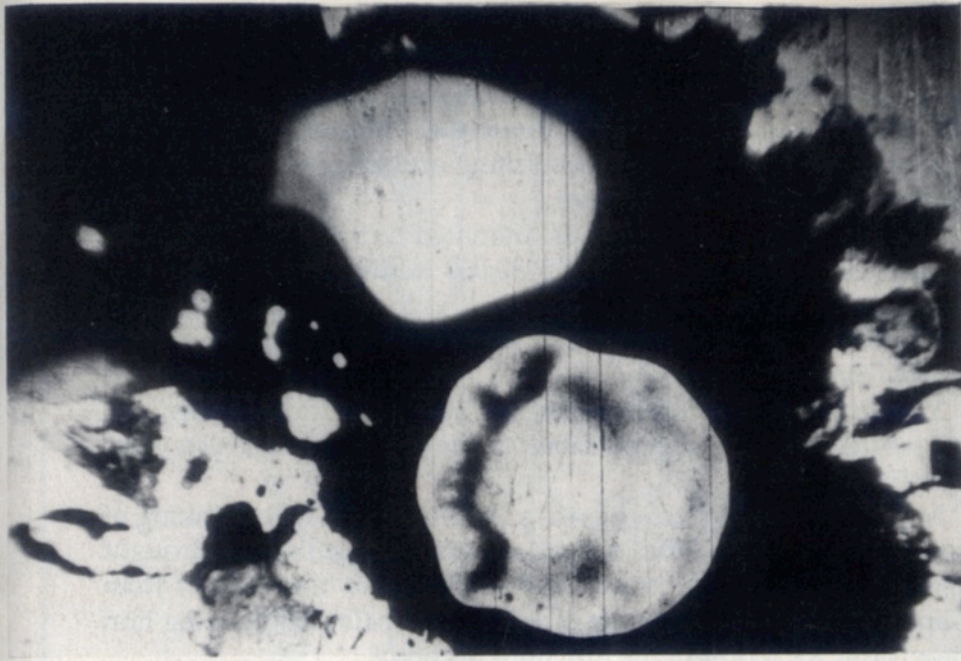
He supported me by sometimes giving me pocket money! He works as a banker and a stand-up comedian, and contributes some ideas for the comic strips.

You made Ink in 1987: 'Ink. Clouds. Clouds. Ink. Cut-to-cut. Clouds. Ink', says the program note.

I just put ink on a white board, and added drops of alcohol to it, shooting it frame by frame. Sometimes the board is tilted to move the ink about. I intercut timelapsed shots of real clouds into it. It's a short, 3 minute film.

The clouds are swirling around quickly with movements similar to that of the ink, and you cut on common movements.

One film I made, *Moron's Hobbies*, which won second prize in the CCP, no longer exists. It was stolen from a car. Another film of mine which is currently missing — it's not been returned from Germany since I sent it last year — is *Moron's Monolog*. It's a 9 minute film, and I appear in it. I wrapped my face with rubber bands and performed a monolog!



In 1987 I made **Juan Gapang**, or Johnny Crawl: 'On the first day he crawled. On the second day he crawled. On the third day he crawled. . . On the seventh day he took a rest beside the sea.' A friend, June Castillo, wearing only his underpants, was painted with white latex paint all over his body. He crawls from Mowel-fund Film Institute, here, through town to the sea. The first guy we had to do it quitted, he got tired of crawling, so we had to find someone else! We shot it at 9 fps to make it more speedy. We see him crawling through the traffic and the crowds of people in the city, along the edge of a bridge, and finishes at the Manila Film Center at Makati. That's where Imelda Marcos had some international film festivals organised during the Marcos years. At the back of it is the sea, and that's where we shot the last sequence. There's some stone and boulders there. The sound is from a Filipino bamboo instrument, the kobing, that's put in the mouth and twanged, like a jaws harp.

A recent, 1989 film being shown at the festival is **Pencil**, 'Roxlee's most intimate, most personal film so far'.

I didn't really want it shown to the public, because I was just experimenting with some expired film stock, with the idea that if it didn't turn out it was OK, it would just be in my personal collection. I just positioned the camera and let it roll, and then I took off

Ink, by Roxlee

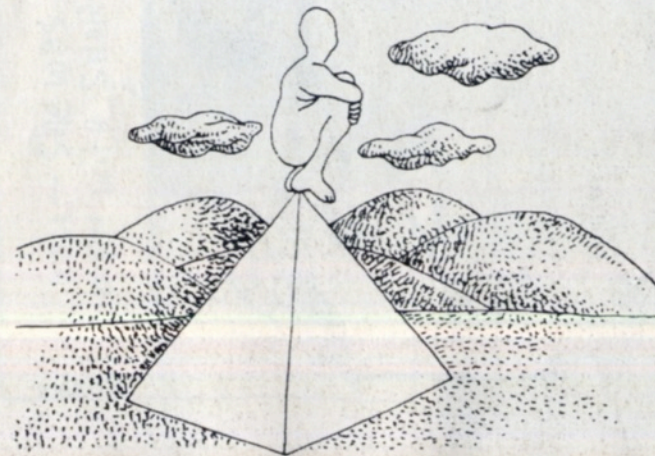
my underpants and stood naked and drew with a pencil on my body. It doesn't make any line, I'm just sort of massaging my body with the pencil, and I integrated some other images from found footage. It turned out fine, the image isn't affected by the stale stock. It's a silent film.

One of your 16mm films is **Spit/Optik**. It's actually two films joined together.

Yes. **Spit** is an animated film about a man with no brains. God advises him to fish for one from a cloud of floating brains, at the same time pointing out that as he has no brains he won't be able to fish for them! His spit becomes various objects through the film. The sound is me, singing a song I composed. **Optik** is a collage of super 8, 16mm and 35mm film images found in a film lab's garbage can, optically printed. That was the influence of Christoff Janetzko! It was done at a workshop he organised. The sound is street kids at play. This is the second film I made at a workshop funded by the Goethe Institute — the other was **Juan Gapang** made in a workshop run by Birger Bustorff with Dr Uwe Schmelter, the Goethe Institute director.

How did you find these Goethe Institute workshops, working with these Germans, who are very different people?

The workshops were in a sense on experimental film and I learned a lot from them, especially from Janetzko, he's good technically, also with the concepts in an experimental way. They easily adjusted to the situation here and we were left to develop our own ideas, without any interference. Recycling 'found footage' was one of his suggestions.



Spit, by Roxlee

This year, at yet another Goethe Institute workshop with Janetzko, I made *Mix 1 & 2*. This has an environmental theme — the effect of urbanisation on the natural environment. The footage was on super 8, in the city and the country — it's old super 8 film I shot, printed on the optical printer to 16mm. I used the song 'Agila' by Joey Ayala which is about a rare Filipino bird, the Monkey-Eating Eagle, which is nearly extinct. The song is about the threat to the eagle from development. I filmed a caged eagle, and I filmed the landscape at Mount Apo, the highest mountain in the Philippines, in Mindanao, the south island. *Mix 1 & 2* refers to the two sections, the city and the countryside. It runs for 6 minutes.

Many of the other Filipino films have credits for producers and funding assistance — often members of the family — but I notice yours have no production credits. Are you funding these films yourself?

Yes, when I was doing animation I approached some people who seemed interested, but when they saw it was my drawings,



Photo by Louis Chiong

Roxlee

they lost interest! I had to finance it myself. For the 16mm films, we often get some assistance from the Philippine Information Agency in that they do the processing and printing. The Goethe Institute is also very supportive.

My next project is to make an animated film of my comic strip, 'Cesar Asar'. I have funding of ₱ 30,000 from CCP. It'll be about 9 minutes, 16mm.

I gather there have been several narrative films based on popular Filipino comic strips.

Yes. So far they have all been very commercial feature films.

I see you are doing a performance at the festival — have you given many in the past?

Mainly only for private viewing. At the festival I am thinking of doing a rain dance, since we are experiencing a serious drought here. We'll have rock music, and we'll repeat the idea in *Juan Gapang* of painting someone in white latex paint, and having him crawl, and we'll project the film onto his body.

Roxlee Filmography

Tronong Puti (Script: Roxlee, Director: Ted Arago) — super 8mm, 8 mins., 1983

The Great Smoke — super 8mm, animation, 6 mins., 1984

Tatlong 'A' — super 8mm, 6 mins., 1984 (Revised in 1987 as *Lizard* — see below)

Tao at Kambing — super 8mm, 6 mins., 1984

Inserts — super 8mm, 5 mins 21 secs., 1985

ABCD — super 8mm, animation, 5 mins., 5 secs., 1985

Lizard, or How to Perform in Front of a Reptile — 16mm, 5 mins., 1987

Ink — super 8mm, 3 mins., 1987

Juan Gapang — super 8mm, 6 mins., 1987

Prayle — 35mm, 10 mins., 1987, with Noel Lim, Joey Agbayani, Patrick Purugganan and Raymond Trinidad

Pencil — super 8mm, 5 mins., 1989

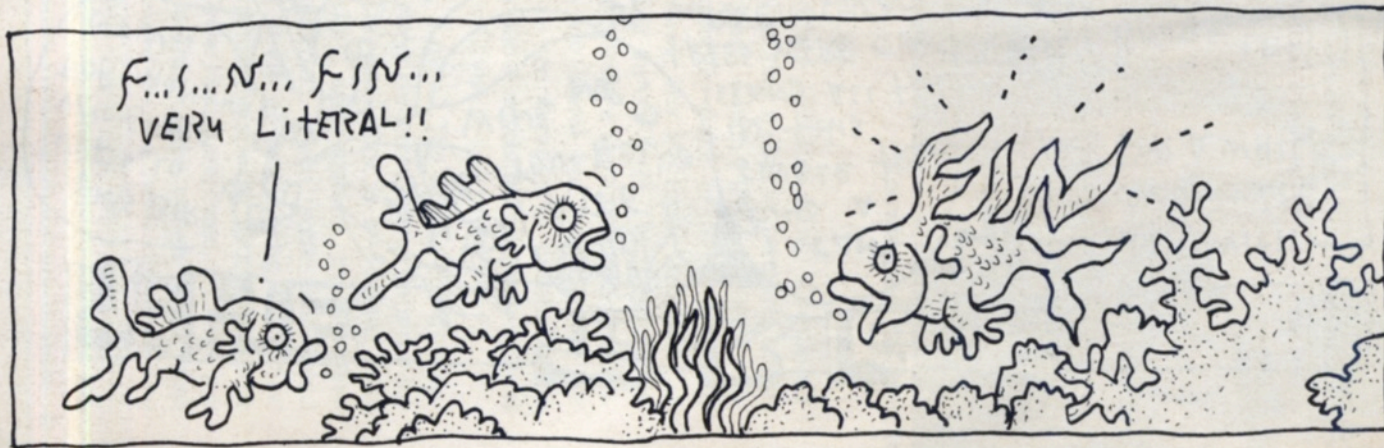
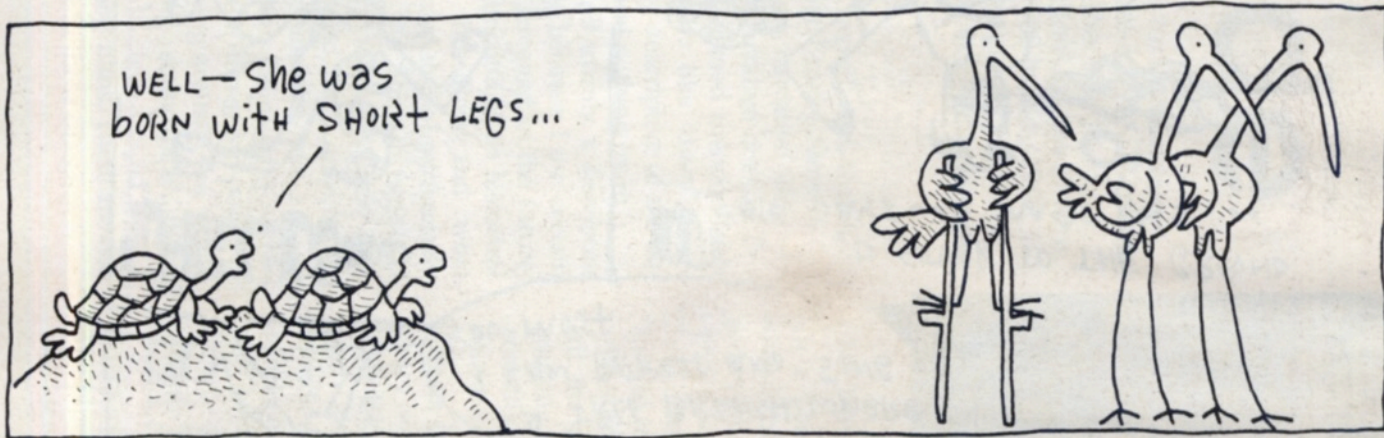
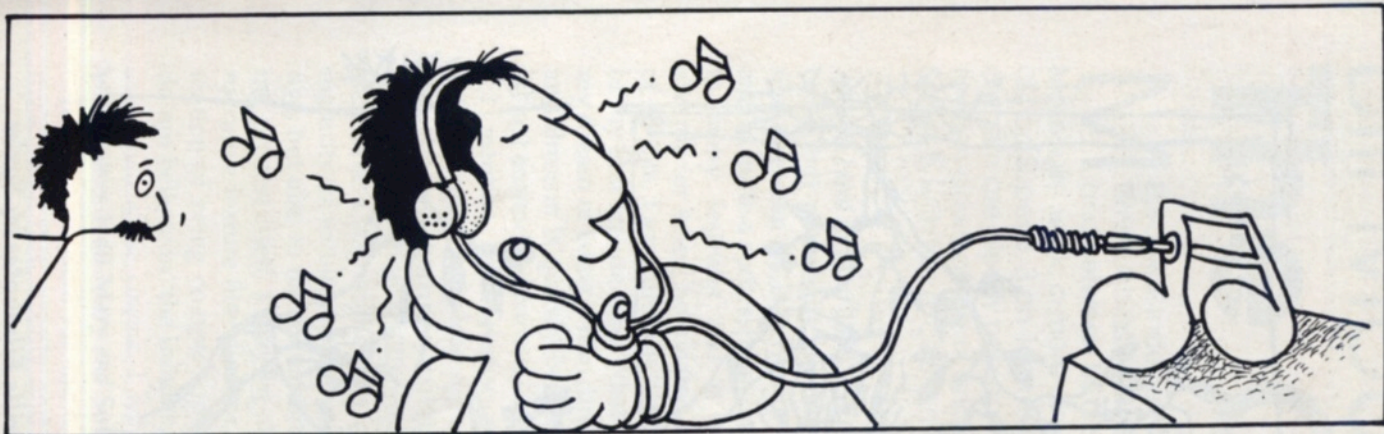
Spit / Optik — 16mm, animation, 15 mins., 1989

Moron's Hobbies — super 8mm, 9 mins. (lost)

Moron's Monolog — super 8mm, 9 mins.

Mix 1 & 2 — 16mm, 6 mins., 1990

□



THE TREE

THIS BIRD IS FOLLO WING ME FOR MONTHS NOW...

WHY ARE YOU FOLLO WING ME?

I CAN'T FIND A SINGLE TREE IN THIS ISLAND. ALL THE TREES WERE CUT BY VORACIOUS LOGGERS. I MUST FIND A TREE BRANCH WHERE I CAN PERCH AND SING. YOU MUST HELP ME.

THE MAN WITH THE WOODEN LEG THINKS FOR A WHILE...

hmm - Let's See ...

THEN...

CHOK

HE STAYED STUCK TO THE GROUND FOR DAYS... MONTHS...

HE STAYED STUCK TO THE GROUND FOR DAYS... MONTHS...

... UNTIL SOME ROOTS AND BRANCHES AND LEAVES GREW ON HIS WOODEN LEG..

NOW... THE BIRD PERCHES ON ONE OF THE BRANCHES - HAPPILY SINGING...

NOW... THE BIRD PERCHES ON ONE OF THE BRANCHES - HAPPILY SINGING...

NOW... THE BIRD PERCHES ON ONE OF THE BRANCHES - HAPPILY SINGING...

ROXLE