The Long and the Tall of It, by Gerald Saul.

BRITSKI!

For over a decade, Jason Britski has been creating short films which explore memory and the film form. His work consists of fifteen films ranging in length from 2-18 minutes that use a loose but careful shooting style in combination with optical printing to rearrange common images into uncommon films. Together, the films begin to draw a portrait of the enigmatic "Britski".

Through a chronological viewing of Britski's collected work, I begin to perceive the journey he takes, moving in at first in time and later in space. Memory, the time travel we use every day, comes into play from his earliest video, *Negation* from 1996. The title is one of Britski's more obvious ones. It refers to the nature of the images: negative black and white video looking upwards into the canopy of trees, at buildings, at traffic lights, and at telephone wires. This visually bold work suggests a certain amount of questioning of the everyday as we are unable to entirely recognize what is being negated through this transformation of the image. On second viewing, I watch and expect to make note of formal attributes but am suddenly taken away by the rumbling noise of airplane engines on the soundtrack. Sounds, which at first may seem haphazard in Britski's films, have been carefully planned to surprise us and to evoke memory. For me, the airplane engine reminds me of gaps in conversations/television/action when jets flew over our house when I was a child. While this interpretation could not be sited as universal, solitary elements or collisions between images or images and sound, affect many viewers in different ways.

In his second significant work, another video called *Fragile* (1997), Britski's selection of motifs becomes more established. Here we find a conscious study of light with, for the first time, the camera taking an untutored human viewpoint. A train passes by; an everyday occurrence which is focused upon at length until we realize that it is not the train that is of interest but the sunlight shining through the gaps in the cars. The innocence of the vision is reinforced by the scratchy recording of a mother and child (voiced by Jason, his sister, and his mother) talking about farmyard sounds. Again, the calculated collision of sound and image triggers a range of meanings for viewers. The colourful lights shot hand held from a moving car are, as before, mundane, but by slowing down the footage (and later in the 16mm films, by step printing), Britski is able to make us consider image, light, and time differently. The formulation of ideas between ethereal glimpses of light and elusive fragments of sound is fleeting and fragile.

Two years later, Britski completed his first 16mm film: *Exteriors*. At its 1999 debut screening, it was the first of his films that I personally saw. *Exteriors* stands out as an anomaly in some respects. It features sync as well as non-sync sound footage of Abigail Scholar talking to the camera about leaving, of traveling, of getting away. This diaristic content with a person performing to the camera is never returned to in his later films. Strictly analyzing the films formally, *Exteriors* builds upon the theme of "dichotomy" prevalent throughout Britski's films. On the soundtrack we hear sync and non-sync dialogue which certainly suggests internal and external voices, what she is thinking versus what she is doing, form versus content. When Abigail asks "is anybody there?", every experimental filmmaker understands that this is a question we find ourselves frequently asking: is there an audience watching this work? The metaphors

suggested here (interior/exterior reinforced by placement of performer against a brick wall) are relatively obvious and while this is an alluring film worthy of least two or three viewings, it may have felt heavy-handed to Britski. His later films are never as easily interpreted. However, this film introduces the ongoing motif of hands, representing the presence of the filmmaker, first with the title card which is set on a transparency in a picture frame held in the shot by a hand and second as the sync sound sequence begins with a clapper slate. This slate not only identifies the shot but more importantly it suggests to the audience that this "performance" is not the content but rather that the whole film is about the process of filmmaking. Through the dialogue and the sound of the train, *Exteriors* establishes the important theme of travel, rather than simply movement, within Britski's films. One has to ask if this is the thought of the filmmaker about leaving Saskatchewan, a dream acted upon five years later.

With *Ripples in the Snow*, also from 1999, Britski begins to pull together the disparate worlds of experimental cinema, home movies, and his conflicted relationship with home. On an initial viewing, the first of these concerns seems most prevalent with images of Michael Snow and the voice of Richard Kerr reciting the Snow mantra "It's all about time, space and light and how they create ripples." Again Britski implies his own presence with the stylized title cards hand-held in front of the camera against the sky. He leaves his shadow in the compositions at least once, suggesting filmmaker and subject are one and the same. The use of optical printing to inset the image as a smaller frame within the frame, undoubtedly a reference to Snow's seminal formalistic film *Wavelength*, draws the viewers' attention to the filmmaking process. Formal and minimal film present film itself as the only content. However, on subsequent viewings, I began to become aware of other possible intentions within Britski's film. Footage of everyday life, shot in a home movie style, was woven into the film and prompts questions at every turn: who were the old couple? Who were the young couple? Why are there a person and a dog on a pier and later the pier is empty? What are the significances of the hockey players, the Army and Navy building, the train, the telephone wires, and the dog? The answer to these questions is simply that these images all had meaning and significance to the filmmaker, to Jason Britski. We might guess at the answers, that the old couple are Britski's grandparents (true) and that the young couple is the filmmaker and girlfriend (not true, they are actually friends/colleagues Mike Gardiner and Abby Scholar who were initially to compose the score – Mike did but Abby did not take part in the end), and that the dog is his dog (it was actually his grandparents' dog). Regardless, we are faced with a contradiction to the rules of formalism in this inclusion of sentimental imagery. Repeated viewings only further reinforce the idea that this is not a film about film (formal), it is a film about a filmmaker (self portrait). Suddenly the film becomes symbolic of the journey of life (train) and of mortality (young couple and old couple, empty pier, freeze frames of water). Now the question we must consider is why Britski chooses to hide the personal within the impersonal.

Another 1999 film, *You Would Make A Good Lawyer*, also makes the study of light (one cornerstone of formal filmmaking) into a nostalgic moment with the image that perfectly encapsulates the two worlds, a hand held up to the sky allowing the intense light of the sun to intermittently peek through to the lens (our eye). This action with the hand harkens back to childhood, to discovering the pleasure and pain that looking at the sun can have. Britski is simultaneously commenting on the prehistory of cinema, the ancient

act of studying light and shadow, as well as the memory of relatively everyday actions of himself as a child. Again, Britski uses deceptively simple strokes with the camera to evoke complex dichotomies. What diaristic glimpses of Britski can we find in this film? Photofinishing is presented as both a technical process as well as a previous occupation. In my 1999 Splice Magazine article on this film I suggested that the title of this film might refer to career advice from family. I admit that this assumption came from personal experience when I decided to be a filmmaker myself. While this interpretation does support a theme of job/labour/career in *You Would Make A Good Lawyer*, the truth of the title apparently comes from Britski opening seven consecutive fortune cookies to find that advice within each. This begins a pattern of hidden titling that Britski uses to ensure that the interpretation of his films does lies with the viewer rather than in the filmmaker. The image of the caged tiger, again as I suggest in my previous article, could represent Britski. I would update my interpretation to suggest that the cage is formalism with its rigid confines, with Britski as the untamable beast that lives in it but is never entirely ruled by it.

Britski's 2001 film *Transfixed* takes an image of a boy (from found footage) who stands in for the filmmaker as a child, taking a road trip and being fascinated by the blurring of scenery out of the window and the feeling of the wind on the hand. We are made aware of the filmmaking behind these images through the highly visible step printing, dust, and marks on the film. However, the overall impression is of a project with much more deeply embedded personal content. We see a representation of the filmmaker gathering air and light with his hand, suggesting (as with *Lawyer*) the individual as the sole creator of art, a metaphor that supports experimental film ideology (formalism) in a highly romanticized (non-formal) way.

This formal/romantic combination continues with Britski's 2002 film *Moving Violation*, but the sophistication of the blending has evolved to become more of a hybrid style rather than a collision of directions. Britski uses a multitude of technical devices in this project, most notably optically printed split screens and kinescoped pixelvision camera footage, to explore old buildings on the brink of destruction as well as those already long gone. The split screen reminds us of photos glued into albums, both in a graphic sense as well as the chronicle of the past that it represents. Some of the splits in the screen are created by mirrors which, like the album, prompt us to *reflect* on the past. Britski uses the aesthetic variations created by the differing technologies to establish movement between reality and memory. While definitely nostalgic, this film chooses to remember a past full of parking structures and movie theatres rather than opulent mansions and artful towers. Nostalgia taints memory, making palaces out of our simple past.

Shooting Star (2002) makes strong use of collage film strategies to weave together images from the past such as hockey legend Rocket Richard and live x-ray sessions with new footage of a man (in negative) and a star-topped shrine. Techniques that Britski had previously used as formal film conventions such as negative images, optical printing, kinescoping, are now elegantly usurped into a poetic study of masculinity and inevitable mortality. The film is nostalgic without being sentimental, it is playful without being insincere. Formalism is now a strategy for shaping memory, the conflict between form and content appear to be resolved in this new stage of Britski's film work.

The next films, *Arc Light*, *Shoulders on a Map*, and *Tortured by Sidewalks* (all from 2004) were created during a period of Britski's move away from Saskatchewan and subsequent travel. While *Arc Light* was shot at Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon, *Shoulders on a Map* was shot in British Columbia, and *Tortured by Sidewalks* in the Maritimes, they each show clear signs of Britski's connection to Saskatchewan and the methodologies he developed for himself here. *Arc Light* uses some home movie approaches which lend a sense of impermanence to the foreign situation where the images are taken. It is as if the images are gathered so they can be taken home, so the filmmaker is obviously not at home now. *Tortured by Sidewalks*, shot in a combination of film and video on the ocean shore, is certainly a return to his conflicted earlier films. The contrasts in medium, the shifting between images of clarity and abstraction, as well as the fragile correlation between the sound and image create discrepancies in viewer perception and possibly suggest a conflicted state of mind of the filmmaker. Is the relentless sound of the ocean distressing or calming? Is the absolutely straight horizon of the calm sea alien or comforting? *Shoulders on a Map* is a return to many of Britski's favorite motifs, the train (the film is shot inside one rather than outside), the telephone wire (Britski recently told me that one cannot take a bad picture of a telephone wire), and the study of sunlight through the window of a moving vehicle. While the landscape is foreign (mountains of B.C.), the style is rooted in familiar techniques. In many ways these films appear to be created to counteract the feeling of displacement rather than to explore new places.

His return to Saskatchewan marked another milestone in Jason Britski's films. Seemingly drawing on strength from being home and on confidence from his travel experience, the next films continue to explore landscapes beyond Saskatchewan with both a serious analytic eye and a sense of innocent wonder. In *Dead Horse Point* (2006) Britski, armed with a lifetime passion for western movies, ventures into the landscapes that defined this Hollywood genre. The images gathered are not, strictly speaking, everyday sights such as we've seen in his earlier work. Instead, these collected images are all iconic, all part of our collected consciousness as shaped by Hollywood. Monuments for Buffalo Bill, Calamity Jane, Sitting Bull, and Billy the Kid are filmed as well as sites in Montana, South Dakota, the Grand Canyon, and Monument Valley. With subject matter that Britski feels personal reverence for, the filmmaking style is less stylized and more naturalistic. Even the sound follows suit as we hear wind and insects and other cues which tie us closely to the image and subject. The sound changes abruptly with every cut, suggesting that the sound is real and unaltered from the moment of filming. The entire film is further connected to traditional cinema with the inclusion of an audio clip of Gary Cooper at the beginning and a film clip of John Wayne at the end. It seems to me that with this tour of the old west and the sites of so many western films, Britski is recognizing the facts of the old west without ever entirely contradicting or diminishing the fiction of the western films. While there are certainly plenty of moments that are distinctly Britski-esque within *Dead Horse Point* such as a study of the sunset through the limbs of a cactus, it would appear that Britski has allowed the content to have a greater impact on the style of the final film. The pacing is slower, perhaps guided by the stoic nature of the monuments and landscape, perhaps by the maturity the filmmaker now brings to this work.

When his 2006 video *Down Payment on a Dead Horse* began with a text panel quoting Hemingway "All things truly wicked start from an innocence" I knew that Britski was going to begin to consciously address the presence of nostalgia that had been permeating his work. In this counterpoint to *Dead Horse Point*, images presented include desolate snow-swept fields, dead ducks, dead dear, billboards promoting Christ, dead fish, dead bear, and boys with guns. Event based home movies include blindfolded game players, weddings running in reverse, babies being held, and a boy walloping a punching bag, and later, the boy with a cast on his arm. The film is laced with ironic moments such as a monument to the largest antlers and fireworks over a wedding, but it is also critical and disparaging as it looks at the celebrations of killing as part of everyday life. In a different time, perhaps through the eyes of the boy in the film (who looks like he could be Jason Britski but is in fact his father as a child), the events depicted here would be seen with wonder and joy. With Britski's adult eyes, this past is a nightmarish reversal of nostalgia, a time we would rather not return to. The killing of deer is no longer romanticized, even though the murderous actions of Billy the Kid from the previous film still are. In an argument created across these two projects, Britski is no longer suggesting a conflict between reality and memory, but rather between two types of memory. Our rational minds rely on maintaining this conflict, to value our fond memories but to embrace change and leave the past behind.

Britski's newest films, *Hot Under the Collar* and *Lines on a Slow Decline* (2007) both revisit his formalistic roots. *Hot Under the Collar* reproduces a series of "China Girls" (the photograph of a model usually inserted into the leader of a film for checking colour correction adjustments) as bookends to a reproduced Hollywood musical/dance sequence. The song lyrics are "There'll come a time, when you'll regret it … after you've gone away". The nostalgia now seems to be for film, for the scratches, for the flatbed editing machine they are being played on, for the allure of colours partially faded, and for all other subtleties that make watching film a unique and dying experience. Britski suggests a romanticizing of formalism. *Lines on a Slow Decline* returns to some familiar imagery as the black and white negative images of trees and power lines pass through the frame from top to bottom, almost like scratches on the emulsion. As Britski revisits his 1996 video *Negation* with this new film, the depth of his new approach is intriguing to observe. Some images are manipulated to create kaleidoscope effects, but even when they are presented straight onto the screen, the control of the composition and the bravery for how long a single image can remain on the screen demonstrate how Britski has continued to challenge himself. The soundtrack, consisting of radio, guitar, wind, and faint whispering all seems tenuous, forcing us to sit on the edge of our seats paying attention lest the connection between image and sound is broken. In the truest form of nostalgia, this film may be Britski's sentimental way of reliving the act of creating his first film which of course cannot be done. He has changed and all that he has done between 1996 and 2007 influences every frame of this new film.

Is it all about time, space, and light? Can formalism and nostalgia coexist? All I know is that nothing is left in the past.

Jason Britski Filmography
Negation, 1996, 3:00, video
Fragile, 1997, 4:00, video
Exteriors, 1999, 4:30, 16mm
Ripples in the Snow, 1999, 8:00, 16mm
You Would Make A Good Lawyer, 1999, 4:30, 16mm
Transfixed, 2001, 2:00, 16mm
Moving Violation, 2002, 5:30, 16mm
Shooting Star, 2002, 4:30, 16mm
Arc Light, 2004, 3:30, 16mm
Shoulders on a Map, 2004, 4:30, 16mm
Tortured by Sidewalks, 2004, 2:00, 16mm
Dead horse Point, 2006, 18:30, 16mm
Down Payment on a Dead Horse, 2006, 8:00, video
Hot Under the Collar, 2007, 3:00, 16mm
Lines on a Slow Decline, 2007, 10:00, 16mm