

Conversation with Gerald Saul: Creativity and Conundrums
by Paul-Gui Crepeau
2014

Gerald Saul is an established and prolific filmmaker currently living and teaching in Regina, Canada. His extensive body of work extends from his childhood and the family super 8mm camera to feature length films in the 1980s, onto avant-garde and art short films and to recent experimental films that are hand processed, and/or distorted or otherwise manipulated by the filmmaker. Interviewing Gerald Saul is an interesting series of contradictions, or perhaps, better phrased as, a series of conundrums.

An attractive feature of Saul's work, and of Saul himself, which drew me to interview him, is that he has such a breadth of experience and understanding of filmmaking. He can talk easily and knowledgeably about mode, genre, film, emulsion, digital, lenses, history, processing, shot angles, auteurs. He is knowledgeable about every part of the concepts and processes of filmmaking with the exception of the successful commercial dramatic/narrative film.

Saul suggests that we begin our discussion of his work around his *Toxic* series. This series of short, experimental films begun in 2002 and took 4 years to make. Their making coincides with an intense period in Saul's life. He applied for a grant to work with hand-developed film. In a short period of a few weeks, Saul started a family, found out that he had cancer and received the grant. The pieces reflect the upheaval in his life and yet Saul readily identifies the series as his most satisfying work. "I became focused ...*Toxic* brought all the things together: emotion, intellectual, and experiential." in short, all the elements of any good film. The conundrum here is that the 'Toxic' project affected his career much more than the illness reported in film series. While no one would wish for the degree of upheaval in one's life that a cancer diagnosis and surgery creates, out of the personal chaos came an intensity resulting in art that is a career milestone. Saul feels that his work is much clearer and braver since the diagnosis. He reports that the *Toxic* series is so personally satisfying that it leads him to new heights of self-examination: "How can I make something that satisfying again? How can I reflect my life that clearly? What am I doing today? What am I feeling right now?" The intention to recapture that feeling of personal satisfaction is what drives him personally now.

Although he is primarily an Avant-garde, poetic film filmmaker, Saul has a gift for identifying and utilizing images that have universality well beyond the Avant- garde audience. His films are much concerned with memories or sensory perceptions of childhood or one's past. The images are often domestic, easily identifiable. Even from the earliest days of his career, *Wheat Soup* has startlingly evocative images. The scene of two men, silhouetted on a prairie horizon is instantly recognizable to anyone from the Great Plains. Having lived most of my adult life near the coast, I can attest that while a coastal view has a wide flat horizon, it is completely different to an almost imperceptibly undulating prairie horizon. The notion of this variation in the vista is emphasized in *Wheat Soup* by the moving horizon ribboning across the bottom of the screen. Any child hypnotized by the long car drives that living on the prairies necessitates, instantly recognizes the theme of the passing time rather than distance/space. The quality of light due to the low humidity of the prairies is subtle but very identifiable in *Wheat Soup*. Lastly the large, low light source enhancing the silhouettes of the men is reminiscent of the scene in, Willa Cather's tale of Nebraska, *My Antonia*, where a plow, on a slight rise, is caught by the setting sun and, momentarily, the plow's silhouette is projected larger than life. These images are so closely linked to the prairies that there simply would not be a single soul who was raised, lived in, or

even driven through the grasslands that does not immediately and viscerally identify with the images.

Fast-forward a few decades in Saul's career to when a similar event occurs in *Toxic 2, Poppa*. The image is an extreme close up of a toddler's face while he is evidently banging away gleefully at the piano, while a 'dad' voice counts rhythmically, almost metronome-like, within a nursery tune in the voiceover. Although the blurb cheerfully informs us this film is about control, this information is totally unnecessary to anyone who has parented a toddler. We all get the toddler's obvious devoted connection to the parent but we also get the toddler's total lack of regard of the parent's time structure. In this instance Saul connects to such a universal parent meme, its feel nearly encoded in our DNA.

It's a conundrum when the creator of very personal films is a very private person. Saul is a product of a Saskatchewan culture that frowns on self-absorption and reacts negatively to self-aggrandizement. He is essentially a very private person who prefers to make films for the general public rather than his peers as he admits "It's more difficult to share your secrets with someone close to you." And yet his films are intensely personal, autobiographical, in fact. Stojanova summarizes Saul's work as, "identity excavations" and Saul himself, writes "I have employed film to interrogate and express issues of personal identity, seeking ways to explore these issues both through the content and the structure of film," in his artist statement.

I wanted to delve deeper into the personal meanings of some of the imagery in the *Toxic* series, but Saul wasn't having any of it. I attempted to be more specific and asked about the images of Saul digging in the soil. Considering the diagnosis of cancer, and the resulting considerations of one's own mortality, I specifically asked if the images referred to the 'walk of life' or digging a grave, as cemeteries and graves have figured in other works of Saul. Saul immediately backed away and went to the literal, which the images were of him removing and rebuilding a concrete walkway. He would allow that there was an element of the destruction/creation cycle there. As I persisted, Gerald allowed that he doesn't always use images that were, and I quote, "ripe." He knows, and I know, that each and every image, their order, context, and duration, in the *Toxic* series were carefully considered. It becomes clear what meaning he had in the making is his, and what meaning I took as the viewer, is mine.

In our discussion of intention and purpose in filmmaking, he clearly stated that all films are distinctly personal. The content is secondary; it is the voice of the filmmaker that is paramount. The example he used to illustrate his meaning was if he and I were to both make films about robots on Mars, the films would be different. Each film would represent the unique voice of the filmmaker. Each film would be entirely dependent on the personality of the director/writer. Saul explicitly states that this personal aspect is more important the content or story of the film.

Upon closer examination, his example is an interesting conundrum. Saul's work is known to make frequent use of very accessible, universal images, which are often domestic. His artist statement specifically says his central theme is autobiographical. However, for his example, he deliberately chose an environment and content in which we each had no history or experience or memory. 'Mars' would be a blank canvas. There would be no shared memories or experiences. I think what Saul is saying is that on the blank canvas of 'Mars', the filmmaker would have to connect to his own experiences and project some aspect of that onto the screen in such a fashion that the viewer can associate to his or her own understandings.

Similarly, our discussion of interpretations of films includes who the intended audience is. Saul's

stated preference toward making films for the general public I've already mentioned, but he adds he sometimes makes films for his peers, which would certainly be the definition of avant-garde films. His view on this seems to be consistent over his career as his thesis has a great quote from the filmmaker Michael Hoolboom's mother commenting that "this is a film for other filmmakers." (Thesis, pg. 18) Saul's thesis points out that this is elitist filmmaking, which is made for an informed audience. I find this consistent with most poetic films: a highly personal and subjective view made for an informed audience. This is interesting coming from someone who states his most satisfying work, *Toxic*, is made for himself and who voices a preference for general audiences and has a history of easily accessible imagery. However, I put this down to his wide-ranging experimentation in filmmaking. The conversation links audiences and interpretations and here Saul has strong and very definite views:

There are unexpected, but not accidental, interpretations of images but I don't believe in intentionally ambiguous films. I disbelieve artists who deny an interpretation of their work; who say it is up to the audience to interpret the work. The artist MUST have a reason to have a reason to do the work/make the statement. (Interview)

Again Saul is consistent over time. His master's thesis is clear that creativity and its expression are the goal: "Interesting films are made by creative filmmakers, regardless of budget or film gauge. More money just gives you more film, not more ideas." (Thesis, pg. 9) We talked about his decision not to pursue commercial films. Saul is very comfortable with his choice to confront the challenges and comforts of 'doing his own thing' and while he allowed it might be fun, he firmly stated, "You don't make your mark in history making those kind of [commercial] films." (Interview)

Later when I asked this very prolific film artist how he would like to be remembered, I was initially surprised when he said as a teacher. After reflection, I recalled that I embarked on this paper to document Gerald Saul's influence on avant-garde film in Canada through the influence of his own work, but also through the generational pass down to his students. I initially attempted to survey current avant-garde filmiest in Canada but apparently they don't respond to surveys. When I expanded the survey to include to a few other film professionals who I knew would respond, I found a few overarching themes. One was that they initially feared that their own non-avant-garde film interests would not be served as Saul was a highly prolific Avant gardist, his expertise would be confined to that area only. Instead they reported that he had far-flung film interests and knowledge that he was more than willing to share or explore further. Another was the ability to converse and think deeply about film, and that really rich, thoughtful dialogue was a feature of talking film with Saul. Lastly, I consulted my own, not insubstantial, expertise in theatre and drama.

A dramatic production is constructed by the director, from the writer's material, with actors and designers of stage, light and sound. Each is an artist in his or her own right and with their own voice. The construction must be woven by the director from many strong threads or it fails. The artists work in collaboration and support of each other. While the director has the responsibility of creating a cohesive whole by supplying the leadership of his vision, his vision cannot be made a reality by fiat, it must be brought to life through supporting artists. So, while the director is in a position of power, his or her authority depends entirely on their ability, or 'to develop art in others. A good director gives hints or points of reflection for the artist but must allow the artist to create their own art.

Gerald Saul innately has the 'directorial' quality to develop creativity in others. I have seen, in class, Saul go through this process of supporting students, giving them the benefits of his

expertise, but not guiding them directly. We spoke about the process of assisting artists to be successful. I pointed an experience in class, and Saul responded that when the student began to connect and feel good about his voice and his work, he began to work harder than ever before and produced his best quality work to date. This ‘directorship’ quality is seen again when we discuss identifying potential students. Saul says, “Look for people who want to be creative, who have a desire to say something. It is often not in their history, but in their need to have a voice, a ‘way’ of saying. I look for people who have the potential to say something.” (Interview)

Commercial cinema does not come to artists. Artists have to seek it, generally, through agents. Gerald has deep, rich understanding of filmmaking and the appreciation of others’ voice through their art. He certainly has stories and themes to deliver to an audience. The tradeoff in making commercial films is that collaboration requires an acceptance of more inherent control issues but one is able to reach a far greater audience. Gerald Saul has something to say and the ability to truly connect with a wide viewership. I think Gerald Saul needs an agent.

Works Cited

- Anger, Toxic 5*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 2004. Film.
- Begin, Toxic 1*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 2002. Film.
- Final, Toxic 6*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 2002. Film.
- Naive, Toxic 4*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 2003. Film.
- Peterson, James. *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avante-garde Cinema*. N.p.: Wayne State Wayne State University Press, 1994. Print.
- Poppa, Toxic 2*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 2002. Film.
- Saul, Gerald. *Canadian Avant-Garde Film in the 1990s*. Thesis: York University, 1996. *Gerald Saul*. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/Thes_sht.pdf>.
- - -. Personal interview. 10 Dec. 2013.
- Stojanova, Christina. “private Regina: ‘the poetics of memory.’” *Splice Winter* (2009): 4-9. Print.
- Thin Letter, Toxic 3*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 2003. Film.
- Toxic Suite*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 2004. Film.
- Wheat Soup*. Dir. Gerald Saul. http://nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/films_chronological.htm, 1987. Film.