

The Long and the Tall of It
Gerald Saul
Review of Ron Mein's "Jerry's Journal" video series.

Ron Mein's stories don't fit—too crude to be commercial, too funny to be art, too absurd to be diaries. But in the realm of the web, the credo of "build it and they will come" is paramount. All stories, big and small, find homes there and that is where Mein's "Jerry's Journal" series of over 30 short irreverent identity-questioning videos dwell.

The modesty and availability of "Jerry's Journal" exemplifies the value of the Internet as a means of exhibiting video free of the constraints of market and of the tyranny of "industry standards." I would like to suggest that it is only a matter of time before Mein's videos become an international sensation, but the problems of viewership far outweigh those of creation. Web video viewers defy categorization, just like the videos found there. They display highly contradictory traits of extreme tolerance and intolerance simultaneously. While technical and traditional expectations are often low, the clicking of the stop/skip/next/exit button is notoriously fast. Ironically fickle, there is no telling when, if ever, an audience will form for a chosen body of work.

When I speak of Ron's "Jerry's Journal" videos, I refer not only to the eight remastered pieces he created with producer Dave McLean and presented earlier this year at the Saskatchewan Filmpool premiere screening, but also of the 33 even rougher web videos of the same series that he has been posting on-line over the past two years. This body of work demonstrates the impressive range of storytelling Mein is capable of. Centred around the first-person narratives of the title character, the one- to two- minute long stories show us a self-deprecating and antisocial character for whom despair is the norm.

While some stories deal with cliché and far fetched subjects (fear of being raped in prison, etc.), many are fresh and close enough to home to elicit an uncomfortable combination of humour and dread. Jerry's life is steeped in faux pas as he addresses girls he likes by the wrong name, as he admits he is not who someone thinks he is, as he fails to fit in with racists because he doesn't know that even they have limits, as he fails to see subtext in on-line chat room dialogue and implicates himself as a pedophile, or as he discovers too late that he should never be himself.

The videos remain fresh due, in part, to the loose approach to their creation. These non-animated films are generally made by pointing a video camera at the simple line drawings, panning and zooming around the page with a camera style that often feels improvised. Each video is completed with Jerry's first- person narration delivered in Mein's own voice. The approach is deceptively non-naive. While the drawings on-screen are unsophisticated and the tools he uses (at least for the web videos) are consumer level and easily accessible to many people, the rhythm and pacing of the pans and cuts, and the relationship of the image to the sound demonstrate skills developed over years of study and practice.

Mein has found an intriguing outlet for his viewpoints through this fictitious Jerry character. The intimacy of direct address suggests a close correlation between creator and subject. The question of how much of Jerry is Ron and Ron is Jerry underlies the entire project. While Mein denies being this archetypical Canadian angry loner of cinema lore, there is certainly intersections between them. The Internet, where "Jerry's Journal" is primarily found, invites suspicion, particularly where the construction or concealment of identity is concerned. Mein carefully and premeditatedly tries to insulate himself from Jerry, changing him to a creative writing student rather than a film student as Mein was at the time he began the series, for

example. Changes such as this give Mein the necessary deniability of “Jerry’s Journal” being “Ron’s Journal” and, by association, of being an ongoing admission of emotional absence. As a character of fiction, deviant thoughts, aspects that each of us might carry to one degree or another, can be exposed. Jerry is an awful person whom I’d never be interested in meeting. However, in a brilliant exercise of anti-identity, he simultaneously exhibits characteristic I cannot deny identifying with. He is the “we” that we don’t want to be.

I am tempted to embrace the less-than-professional viewpoint “I don’t know what’s good, but I know what I like”. Simply put, I like these videos even though they are created with a nearly complete disregard for artistic and technical standards we collectively regard as the hallmarks of quality. However, it is through his consistency of flaws and the way that he delves into murk of our psyche that we can recognise the talent underlying Ron Mein’s “Jerry’s Journal” video series. The apparent sloppiness of the camerawork as it slips in and out of focus, tilts, pans, and wanders around the page of crude line drawings is far from naive. It is with a keen sense of humour , painful irony, psychological intuition, and dead-on filmic timing that Mein manages to deliver the punch lines with gut-wrenching accuracy. If you don’t like them, ask for your money back. They are on-line and free, check them out.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/B8DRU>