

private regina

the poetics of memory

by Christina Stojanova

It is not exactly the presence of a thing but rather the absence of it that becomes the cause and impulse for creative motivation
Alexander Archipenko

*Saskatchewan is known for producing:
30% of the world's uranium,
the word psychedelic,
sentimental filmmakers*

The Epic Story of My Life, Part III

Since the early 1990s, memory practices have enjoyed an emphatic presence in the arts, stimulated by the millennial angst but also by the expansion of historical scholarship and the ever insatiable museum culture, increasingly interested in personalizing traumatic historical events like the Holocaust and the residential schools, to name but a couple, hidden in family archives, albums, and home movies. Moments of extreme duress in the present have also galvanized the mnemonic desires. As Andreas Huyssen writes, 'in the current processes of economic globalization, political instability and massive migration, national traditions and historical pasts are increasingly deprived of their geographic and political groundings' (4). The inevitable result is loosening of familial, communal and national bonds, and fear of identity loss, which has triggered an unprecedented rise of visual self-archiving – photographs, 'Facebooks', blogs, home movies, etc., as well as equally unprecedented interest of the legitimate media and cinema – documentary and fictional – to private, first hand records of dramatic moments in the everyday life of ordinary people. Indeed, memory has become an aesthetic trend in its own right. The question that begs for an answer however is whether this obsession with memory is prompted by the perennial struggle of memory against forgetting or is a symptom of an acute (post) modern memory crisis? In this line of thought, Huyssen says that:

For the more we are asked to remember in the wake of the information explosion and the marketing of memory, the more we seem to be in danger of forgetting and the stronger the need to forget. (18)

Yet the wide proliferation of media technologies and their accessibility to professionals and lay populace alike, while aggravating the memory crisis, have also pointed to ways out of it, inspiring new approaches to the 'current dynamics of the fragmented memory politics of different social groups.' (ibid., 17)

Recent films by three Regina filmmakers – Steve Suderman's *Over Land* (2006-2008); the four instalments of Brian Stockton's tale *The Epic Story of My Life* (2002-2008) and Gerald Saul's super 8 mini series *Mr. Saul's Utopia* (2005-2008) offer three very different visions of 'fragmented memory politics' via self-reflexive and truly (post) modern approaches to the intimacy of family memories as a means of bringing to light important social phenomena. Or as Peter Forgacs has aptly put it, 'it is intriguing to see the tension /contrast/ between the important, exquisite, excellent, historical event horizon of the official 'Grande histoire' (visualized by newsreels, fictions, docs, reporters) on one side, and the very different private histories on the other, whose seeming banality shines on the border of the public and the private' (Forgacs, web-source).

Memories From a Farm

The struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

Milan Kundera

Steve Suderman's debut *Over Land* – a poignant saga of loss – follows for over two years the futile attempts of the Suderman family to hold on to their farm in Gladstone, Manitoba.¹ Focusing on the relentless efforts of his father, two brothers and their families, the director reveals the intricate reasons for this inevitable loss. By placing seemingly banal everyday events at the border of unfavourable public policies and private emotional commitment, he sets in high dramatic relief the paradigmatic prairie clash between the endangered tradition of family farming and the crash commercialization of agriculture, epitomized by mega-corporations like McCain Foods and Simplot. And although 'farming is in the blood' of this family of Mennonite background, the younger generation's vanishing confidence that tilling of the land is the only alternative, spells out the end of the farm's anchoring presence as a home and livelihood for the Sudermans. More, on a philosophical level it signifies the ubiquitously weakening respect for work as an inspirational end in itself.

Over Land comes closest to what Bill Nichols calls interactive documentary with its penchant for 'social exchange and representation' via the 'acknowledgment of the filmmakers presence' leading to an emphasis on 'the act of gathering information'. The 'authority of the film to speak about the world is subdued' by the filmmaker's 'partialness ...and local knowledge' (Nichols, 44), facilitating 'the process of social and historical interpretation' (Nichols, 49). Unlike the epistemological assertiveness of the expository mode, where the filmmaker is usually projected as the ultimate owner of a single truth, Suderman's 'partialness ...and local knowledge' is derived from his actual interaction with his subjects, but also by his inevitably emotional approach to events and people.

The dramatic potential of these events is harnessed into a narrative, encompassing loosely four seasons (from fall 2006 to summer 2007), and featuring well-crafted psychological portraits of the family members. Richard is the father for whom farming is not just another means to an end of exploitation and greed, but a matter of pride and vocation. At the threshold of retirement, he is thrown into a profound crisis, affecting the very fundamentals of his existence. And only after spending some time at a retreat prior to the dreaded auction day, is he able to imagine a future, intrinsically linked to his life-long dream to produce food –if not here, then in some developing country where his farming expertise may still be in demand. Then comes Mike, the first-born, an introverted and sensitive man who, in spite of sacrificing his future as an architectural designer for his love of the farm, acknowledges his inability to 'keep up with his father's push' – 'maybe I give up too easily', he says. Eventually his desire to search for an identity outside the farm overpowers his timidity, catalyzing the decision to sell. Symbolically, towards the end of the film, we see Mike turn to carpentry as a more profitable occupation, 'paying off at the end of everyday', with him finally in charge of his and even his father's life.



STILL FROM OVER LAND BY STEVE SUDERMAN

Chris, the younger brother, is the stoic one, taking the challenges of life as they come. Like Mike, he is well educated – a licensed pilot – but gives farming a chance, lending the father his and his wife's willpower and love for the land. A man of fewer words, he never lets us in on his thoughts and feelings about the pending auction sale or its aftermath. His wife Darlene is the one who voices their emotions for Steve's camera in her ardent defence of small farms as the only venue for organic farming, and is caught in a tearful breakdown before Mike's wife, Serena, when the sale becomes inevitable. The boys' mother, Agatha, a strong and intelligent woman, although divorced from the father for fifteen years, is still closely involved in the family life on the farm, which for her remains the best place to raise children.

Behind the scene – that is, behind the camera – is the visually unidentified third brother, Steve. Fleeting seen in a group family photo, placed as a memento at the very end of the film, he refers to his own feelings only once in his sparing voice over narration – 'I started to feel

are shattered, and as a powerful public statement against the dehumanization of twenty-first century capitalism.

Childhood Memoirs

Odysseus longs for home; Proust is in search of lost time
James Phillips

In the first four instalments of his mini-series *The Epic Story of My Life* (total duration about 40 min) Brian Stockton also takes a sentimental approach to family memories, but in a light and self-ironic mode. Brought on initially by an identity crisis during his 'nine-year exile' in Toronto and the negative stereotyping of his home province as the 'big empty', the nostalgic sentiment of the series is elegantly counterbalanced by irony – in the sense of 'saying as little and meaning as much as possible', without 'passing moral judgements' (Frye, 40). Each film is devoted to a time period from his birth to age ten, and to places his family

home-movie images of the newly built and prosperous Whitmore park, shows himself playing in its backyards and alleys, amusement playgrounds, and later attending its beautifully designed new school. And, of course, makes us privy to his growing infatuation with the most urban of all arts – that of cinema.

The films reveal the interdependence of identity and the personal psychic past, excavated by memory, through private memoirs, closely intertwined with the rapid evolution of the province of Saskatchewan and the city of Regina over the last hundred years. A particularly alluring aspect of intimacy, where the private and the public – while running in parallel independent tracks – complete each other in their de- and re-contextualisation of the past. Each film is aptly structured as a collage, pleasingly glued together by Stockton's self-reflexive voice-over narration. Sprinkled with wry innuendos like 'the older you get, the more dead people you know', or 'this is my brother, running like an idiot in front of our modest home in North Battleford', and even better, 'I learned

genealogical trees, and sketches, but also the authors' unquestionable drawing talent.

The public track features maps, period post-cards of the imposing legislative building and of Wascana bridge, documentary footage – archival or shot by Stockton himself, and most importantly – intertitles, offering a mixed bag of relevant historical, geographical, and social data, amusing trivia and even celebrity gossip from the period.

The juxtaposition of the private and the public tracks, and of their respective ingredients, is decisive for the energy of the collage narrative, and in this Stockton proves to be a follower of Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions', in which 'arbitrarily chosen' images would be presented not in 'chronological sequence but in whatever way would create the maximum psychological impact' or 'shock', pursuing 'the precise aim of specific final thematic effect' (Eisenstein, 89). Indeed, the 4 kindergarten stories are 'shockingly' contrasted to documentary footage of Regina's centennial celebration in the summer of 2003, in front of the magnificent building



as if I let them down.' Yet his mostly tacit questions and considerate framing of his subjects within the comfortable confines in and around their home and office, or engulfed in work they are so obviously dedicated to, amount to a sentimental attempt to somehow shelter them in a parallel cinematic reality from the anguish they are going through. The Sudermans are seen maybe for the last time on the farm, crying, laughing and speaking their minds before Steve's empathic camera, and looking freely at it. For, as in a home movie, they are doing it not to be objectified into unique images or social symbols but out of love for the person behind the camera. Through the very act of tactful revelation of these very private memories-in-the-making to the public eye, Steve Suderman precludes any fashionable voyeuristic exploitation of the victims in the name of a didactic message (as is the case with the expository documentary mode) and cajoles the viewer into a prudent meditation on the destructive effects of omnipotent socio-economic forces on human lives. This allows *Over Land* to be interpreted both as a private philosophical contemplation on what it takes to remain human, when the very foundations of your existence

called home from 1964 to 1974. And, as is the case with the two appendices *All the Teachers I Have Known* (2006) and *The Man Who Built My Childhood* (2008), to the people who have profoundly influenced the director's formation as a human being and as an artist. *The Saskatchewan Trilogy* (parts I, II and III) comprises age zero to seven, while *Whitmore Park*, the newest, fourth part of the series – age nine to ten.

If Suderman's film falls into the Saskatchewan discursive paradigm of a local tradition besieged by globalization, Stockton's film fits into another, also typically Saskatchewan paradigm – that of the traditional construction of local identity as rural, based solely on 'the land' (Ramsay, 217) as opposed to the urban identity of metropolis like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. 'Unlike a lot of people in Saskatchewan', says Stockton, 'I had no connection to a family farm, so I always felt like a city kid surrounded by a mythology that was entirely rural' (Rogalski, web-source). Therefore he sets out to re-create the urban mythology of his childhood, revoking glimpses into the way of life with its sights and sounds, and fleetingly optimistic preoccupations with 'the future'. He evokes photographic and flickering

the intricacies of drawing a shoe with a heel and a woman's haircut from my classmates in grade two', the commentary in conjunction with the image, create a uniquely comic effect, strongly remindful of the great 19th century Serbian satirist Branislav Nušić and his *Autobiography*, one of the best childhood memoirs ever written, and certainly of Woody Allen's forays, whose ardent disciple Stockton seems to be.

The private track mimics the fragmented and unreliable work of memory through a patch-work of images and techniques. It features excerpts from home-movies, filmed by Brian's parents – 'my first steps, birthday parties, the 1969 Grey Cup as well as recording days of particularly warm winter conditions' – making us aware of the conventional sentimentality in portraying family life. Then there are family photos and relics, used as *aide-mémoire* for Stockton's comments; and amazingly versatile dramatization of anecdotal episodes like the 4 kindergarten stories, or Stockton's first exposure to the magic of filmmaking in primary school, which provokes his 'cautiously optimistic' enthusiasm. And finally, there are the cartoons and the rotoscope animation, illustrating the narrative with diagrams,

of the First Nations University (*Saskatchewan part II*). The recurring image of a 1960s TV set, playing promotional video of city festivities to the tune of 'That's My Wonderful Town', serves more as an evocative structural refrain than as transition. It leads straight to an intertitle, reading *I have been alive for 39% of Regina's existence as a city*, followed shortly after by another, saying *The first nations people of Saskatchewan have been living there for at least 10,000 years*, leaving it to us to do not only the simple, but also the cultural math.

In addition to the collage and montage techniques, music and its lyrics play a strong part in sustaining Stockton's openly declared sentimentality. *My Saskatchewan, My Regina, That's My Wonderful Town, My Heart is in Regina*, and the 'decisively melancholic' mood brought on by the 'languid tones of *The Supers*' (Ramsay, 216) offset the self-deprecation of his witty voice-over commentary, creating a pleasurable harmony of meanings on visual and aural levels and construing Stockton as a principal character, witness, tourist guide, social analyst and a generally naïve anthropologist of his own life.

Thus, by gradually exposing us to the accumulation of elements, shining at the border of private banality and the event horizon of public history, the director places his viewers in the 'spiritual state or psychological situation that gives birth' (Eisenstein, 88) to the idea that his love for Saskatchewan and Regina, past and present, rests at the core of his personal and creative identity.

Memories from the Unknown

A right hand glove could be put on the left hand, if it could be turned around in four-dimensional space.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

All of us have our own "Mr. Saul"

Margaret Bessai

Gerald Saul's six super 8 experimental mini series Mr. Saul's Utopia (total length 27 min) belong to yet another Saskatchewan discursive paradigm, exhibited in films, which choose to ignore the 'the old centre-margin/ universal-local binaries' and, 'in ways characteristic of "discrepant cosmopolitanism" ... simply assume that real people dwell in real places ... and then proceed to tell their interesting stories' (Ramsay, 225).

The fictional hero of the series is a "Mr. Saul", whom the director describes as a 'domineering self righteous yet well meaning man... in the enviable position of being CERTAIN about everything in his life. It is irrelevant if he is right or wrong, all that matters is that he never has doubt. This is where his utopia springs from' (Saul, web-source).

"Mr. Saul" comes through as a somewhat old-fashioned text-book patriarch, whose pedantic character and didactic discourse are universally knowable, even eternal. On a psychoanalytical level, "Mr. Saul" – a self-consciously construed satirical alter-ego of Gerald Saul or projection of his shadow content² – is a neurotic, fully identified with his public persona, or social mask, of the perfect *pater familias*. The director crafts "Mr. Saul's" meticulous aural portrait by having him 'read' in elaborate *officialese* home movies, featuring Gerald's real life wife Margaret and son William. The result is an uncannily palpable "Mr. Saul" brought to life by Gerald's histrionic impersonation, complete with verbal and vocal mannerisms, and dead-pan (if I may) utterances that are uproariously funny.

The films, eloquently titled *A Summer Day with Mr. Saul and His Family* (2005), *Mr. Saul's Definitive Portrait Of His Family* (2005), *Mr. Saul Takes His Family on an Educational Outing* (2006), *Mr. Saul's Day At The Beach* (2006), *Mr. Saul on How To Be A Father* (2007) and the latest, *Mr. Saul's Ultimate Getaway* (in progress), are packaged as "Mr. Saul's" treatises on how to run a family, to raise children, and how to make home movies. "Mr. Saul's" 'readings', foregrounding the cinematic apparatus as a tool of middle class male supremacy, deconstruct the inherent intimacy of home movies³ and conceal their (and his) sentimentality. His smoothly running pontification on the sound-track reconstructs (and simultaneously parodies) the rationalist world of the Logos as a near-perfect self-image of patriarchy. In contrast, the ambiguously blurred images reveal the private (feminine, silent and enigmatic) Imaginary realm of home, wife and son. Thus the altercation of "Mr. Saul's" aural super-ego personality with his repressed emotional self, signified by his consistent absence from the visual track, comes to symbolize his tenacious personality crisis.

"Mr. Saul's" hilarious platitudes about what sets *pater familias* with movie cameras 'apart from normal people and burdens [them] with the responsibility of making and presenting movies', emphatically point to his privileged

knowledge of the Super 8 apparatus with its 'over ten buttons'. An expertise, available only to a chosen few male peers who, like him, are bent on acquiring the ultimate secrets of 'insightful' movie making – that of 'artistry', or the use of tricks such as "depth of field" and "focal length" (*Mr. Saul's Definitive Portrait*...). Certainly, the pomposity of his tirades is thwarted on the spot by the solemn disclosure that the source of the privileged knowledge is 'Wayne, an authorized retail assistant at the photo shop ... with over 7 months experience', and the venerated 'instruction booklet.' (*Mr. Saul's Day*...)

A rigorous guardian of the Super 8 camera secrets, "Mr. Saul" is also the definitive misogynist, who sees his wife's venture into filmmaking as danger to his phallic powers. Therefore he offers a profuse apology for any shortcomings of the 'super-8 movie film before you ... made, in part, by my wife, [who] has not received the training required to create a truly worthwhile movie' (*Mr. Saul's Day*...).

"Mr. Saul's" banal wisdom is further reflected in his rules on 'How To Be A Father' elaborated in the eponymous film and offering an assortment of comic-relief incongruities like 'Rule number one: be perfect. Your son requires a role model', followed by 'Spiderman ... may seem the hero, but with no pockets in his costume, where does he expect to keep his money?' Yet the more he talks, the more he undermines his monolithic image allowing for endearing jokes about William who 'likes his pizza dinner "cooked, and not sat upon"' (*Mr. Saul's Day*...).

On the other hand, ominous intertextual allusions to what might be lurking under his benign persona could be heeded in the rasping articulation of his otherwise innocent advice to 'correct [your child's] enunciation' when reading aloud (*Mr. Saul on How To Be a Father*), uncannily remindful of the advice – that unruly family members should be corrected – offered by Grady the Butler to another strict *pater familias*, Jack Torrance (*The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick, 1980).

In their statement of sound, the pillars of Soviet early cinema, Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov, explicitly insisted on the contrapuntal use of sound in relation to the visuals, resulting in effect that makes the whole not only greater but different than a simple sum of its individual parts, called "tertium quid" or a third thing/ meaning (Eisenstein et al, 234). Following this principle, Gerald Saul keeps diverting the viewer's attention from the visuals to the ironic discussion of their creation and the aesthetic and moral values of their creator. In the meanwhile, the images seem to acquire a life of their own, disengaged from "Mr. Saul's" intense commentary. While traditionally de- and re-contextualized home movies preserve their original function as signifiers of family intimacy and loving bond with the person behind the camera, in *Mr. Saul's* series the images become increasingly alienating, making it obvious that "Mr. Saul" has long ceased to be a part of the life flickering on screen. Albeit smiling diligently for the camera, his wife, son and their friends carry on with their business of having a good time. Indeed, on a couple of occasions, "Mr Saul" is jolted out of his sermons after having lost track of the 'activities' evolving on screen.

Gradually, all those beaches, zoos, birthday parties, smiling faces and mysterious dancing women in black drift away, splintering, crackling and melting, yielding finally the screen to a transparent film, running on empty... Thus the 'third meaning', emerging from the collision of sight and sound in *Mr. Saul's* series reveals the occulted positive content of "Mr. Saul's" own shadow – the artistic and emotive potential of an inventive filmmaker, unassuming husband and a gentle father... Like Gerald Saul, for example.

With their films, Suderman, Stockton and Saul delicately open very private capsules of sentimental events and memories to the public eye and, by artistically negotiating their personal time and space in terms of currently pressing social and psychological issues, they position these works within the larger context of Saskatchewan discursive paradigms of local tradition and globalization, identity politics, cosmopolitanism and alienation. The aesthetic and memory practices they apply – varying from documentary realism through collage techniques to experiments with image and sound – make their 'seemingly banal' stories 'shine' as emotionally engaging and intellectually involving.

¹ The film is based on his award-winning short student film, *From the Farm*, made in 2005 at the Department of Media Production and Studies, University of Regina.

² Jungian term, signifying all contents – negative as well as positive -- repressed in the unconscious, usually becoming manifest as symbolic projections in dreams, myths and the arts.

³ Mr. Saul series are partially inspired by Gerald Saul's intriguing study of Super 8 home movie practices, "The Long and the Tall of It: Home Movies", published in *Splice*, Spring 2004 (5-6), editor Ken Wilson, Saskatchewan Film Pool.

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