

Modern Take – The Screening

The Films of Gerald Saul, as presented at the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative
September 12, 2006

There have been few filmmakers who have had as much influence on the generations of filmmakers that have come through the Filmpool than Gerald Saul. Saul has been an iconic presence at the Filmpool and has served as board member, workshop instructor, volunteer and exceptional member.

Through his untiring efforts at the Filmpool and the University of Regina, Gerald Saul has provided the arts community with a breadth of knowledge regarding contemporary and historical independent film. Not only does he provide an academics vision to this knowledge but also the eye of an artist.

Saul's latest endeavours, *Toxic* and *Modern*, are attempts to rationalize the aesthetics and processes of a modernist art tradition in film within the pragmatic struggles of contemporary filmmaking. Canadian independents are increasingly frustrated in their production by the continuing decline of resources. Through his do-it-yourself aesthetic, Saul implies that it is possible to create a film production that inhabits the space of the modernist aesthetic while simultaneously rejecting need for the laboratory.

Developing in the Tank

In the last 10 years, Gerald Saul's oeuvre has been focused on the development of a do-it-yourself aesthetic that promotes independence from the laboratory. The primary contributor to this independence is the crisis that has been perpetuating among labs and the companies that produce celluloid motion picture film. With the advent of sophisticated video technologies such as MiniDV and High Definition, film is slowly being removed from industrial processes. This has created an economic deficit in third party providers for film, chiefly laboratories. In effect, in the current fiscal environment, film and its laboratory processes have become less and less cost-effective, thus leading to the closures and centralization of labs in Canada.

Independent filmmaking in Canada is faced with few choices in this new development, chief among them being either to change and adapt to the new video technologies, or become aware of the anachronism and resist the 'progress' of the film industry. Artist-run centres across Canada have struggled with these options, and the debates have proven to be heated and contentious. Saul, however, provides the solution that many artist-run-centres and independent filmmakers have sought: to take on and provide to filmmakers the processes and technologies that labs have controlled for so long.

This political choice on Gerald Saul's part has created a developing tank in his work -- both literally and figuratively. The developing tank has not only processed the reels and reels of film that Saul has shot, but has developed the aesthetic with which Saul works (and which has become a hallmark among his films).

Bleeds and scratches

Saul's works blend the aesthetic of hand processing with a content that is at times personal and at others simply about itself. In a practice that focuses so strongly on a political position whereby the process is so significant, it is only natural that Saul should embrace a modernist aesthetic within his work.

With the advent of photography and the ability to cheaply and effectively capture realistic images, traditional forms of representation and their accompanying symbologies were left behind. In their place new subjects and meanings had to be created. This precipitated the call of "Make it New!" and saw an enormous change in the artistic practices of western European cultures. Artists and filmmakers were now embracing images that were as much about the film itself as they were about the image captured. The result was the creation of the abstract movements of Expressionism and Impressionism.

The modern artists, working within the post-industrial world, were concerned with all the significant philosophies of that time. It is through their work that we see many political and philosophical concepts being expounded -- for example, the monumental propaganda of Stalinist Russia, and the Kandinsky paintings of the October revolution. This has also proven to be true in cinema; Eisenstein and Roman both turned their cameras to the Communist cause.

This blending of the political with the surface of the artistic image was to become the hallmark of the Avant Garde, a continually developing movement of artists who espouse the "Make it New!" ideology. Gerald Saul and his work is an extension of that movement. It is somewhat ironic that Saul chooses to embrace ideology with a technology (and a process that is slowly being left behind), but it is appropriate when both the surface and its manipulation by the filmmaker are considered.

Video and other digital technologies are ephemeral processes, meaning they are processes from which the final result is a collection of electronic pulses that cannot be handled, cannot be manipulated and cannot trace the artist's hand within them. In essence, there is a great gap between the object and the producer in these technologies because there is no direct connection between them; everything is mediated by computer or playback deck. This is not the case when film is employed.

Saul has chosen film because it is the element that betrays the trace of his hand most empathically. This is very important when one considers that his content has always focused on his most personal of stories: Toxic, for example, covers topics that include decay, fatherhood, illness and anger. It is not only necessary that we hear the stories of his life, but that we see the images associated with them bleed and scratch as he himself does. In effect, the film becomes a living thing, embodying the pain and human experience that Saul iterates in the film's spoken parts. This play between image and story are an essential part of film, and are well expressed within these series.

Ultimately, however, the bleeding and the scratches are a part of the film itself. In *Modern*, Gerald Saul's latest production, this is the content of the film. This film is about film; it is a visualization of the chemical processes, blended with the marks made by the artist himself. As such, it captures the modernist aesthetic and reinterprets it for contemporary audiences.

With the decline in services provided by the film industry for celluloid film processes, laboratories are becoming sparse. Gerald Saul, through his film series *Toxic* and his film *Modern*, takes advantage of this development (rather than allowing it to dictate his choice of medium) and uses it to apply an aesthetic to his films that is based on the political continuation of film as an artistic medium. To this end, he has also embraced a modernist aesthetic to his work that focuses on the surfaces of his film as much as the content itself.

Saul's work is not entirely unique in the lexicon of Canadian independent filmmakers, as there is a handful of filmmakers who employ similar techniques. What is unique about Gerald Saul is the relationship between the film he uses and the story he tells -- his body and the film strip become interchangeable, and each acknowledges the other. Hand-processing thus becomes a metaphor for our own existence, for the struggles and illuminations that we undergo as we run our way through the reels.

Jemma Gilboy, curator

Screening

Begin (*Toxic* 1)

Poppa (*Toxic* 2)

The Thin Letter (*Toxic* 3)

Naïve (*Toxic* 4)

Anger (*Toxic* 5)

Final (*Toxic* 6)

Modern, chapter 1 (12 minutes with accompaniment from violinist Jeff Looyesen)