

an economy of scale:

**The FILMS**

*of*

**Gerald**

**SAUL ! ! ! ! ! !**

## Screening

19:00, Thursday, July 24, 2003  
Metro Cinema, Edmonton, AB  
Total Running Time – 71 min.

*I Can't Go Home* (1987) – 16mm, 2 min

A jarring and comically offensive film narrated by the far from subtle 'Screaming Banana.'

*Ger-Film* (1986) – 16mm, 2 min

A personal observation of art through art.

*Begin (Toxic 1)* (2002) – 16mm, 5 min

Hand processed images and fragmented soundtrack gives birth to "Toxic" series of six films.

*Dread* (1992) – 16mm, 25 min

A look at the inner most fears of a group of people.

*Final (Toxic 6)* (2002) – 16mm, 5 min

Hand processed images and fragmented soundtrack gives finishes the "Toxic" series of six films.

*Doubt* (1997) – 16mm, 18 min

My thesis film in three parts demonstrating key motifs in lyrical, structural, and collage style avant-garde films.

*Ger-Film II* (1991) – 16mm, 1 min

The further meandering and confusion of an artist in torment.

*Poppa (Toxic 2)* (2002) – 16mm, 5 min

Hand processed images and fragmented soundtrack the 2<sup>nd</sup> film in the "Toxic" series of six films.

*Doctor Watermellon and His Orchastra* (1988) – 16mm, 6 min

A farcical animated documentary about the careers of a pair of cartoon characters.

*These Are Things I Don't Remember* (1995) – 35mm, 2 min

A film featuring fleeting images of bicycles, insects and all the colours of rainbow; about childhood and playing on the driveway.

## An Economy of Scale: The Films of Gerald Saul

Filmmaking is not an elitist medium as many people think. It is not an extremely expensive one either. One needs a creative mind and an openness to explore alternative methodologies. A filmmaker who has not let economic factors (or lack thereof) slow down his cinematic originality is Saskatchewan filmmaker Gerald Saul. For almost two decades Saul has continued to make films despite isolation from major cultural centres and minimal funding opportunities for independent filmmakers. Saul has incorporated this lack of financial support for his films into his aesthetic.

Saul has been making films since 1986 and at the same time the political and economic climate was changing in Canada. Both provincial and federal governments began to freeze or cut arts funding diminishing the resources available to experimental filmmakers. "Availability of money decreased at the same time that the cost of creating films increased. This trend struck blows against the funding of lengthy minimal/structural films, causing a diminishment of these works which had been so widely praised since the sixties."<sup>1</sup> This lack of accessible money forced film artists to a leaner means of production affecting both their pocket books and their aesthetic.

There was a second problem for Saul when he began his career, he did not have a body of work to draw from to show funding juries making it even more difficult to finance his films. "Only the most accomplished filmmakers can count on getting the necessary grant money (of which the pool is shrinking while demand is growing) to create a large body of work.... Without money, it is difficult to hone one's craft. Without having well practiced skills, one is less likely to get money. This 'Catch-22' should logically prevent anyone from making these types of films."<sup>2</sup> This still did not deter Saul when he made his first film *Ger-Film* (1986).

Self-financed, *Ger-Film* is made up of magazine photo clippings, photographs, and drawings playfully animated about on a table. While Saul is making these clipped images move about the screen a voice-over soundtrack can be heard of him describing the events about the making of the film the viewer is presently watching. Saul is speaking as though he is having a conversation but one cannot tell if it is with the audience, someone we cannot hear, or with himself. Throughout this short one minute film he talks about some humorous situations while making the film such as someone confusing this film with "Frank's film" and that the "film was easy to edit."

The aesthetic of *Ger-Film* can be closely linked to the economic factors of its production. The film is very short; at one minute the cost of film stock alone is kept to a minimum. One cannot say too much in a minute so Saul turned to humour in producing the film as his subject. His use of humour also parallels a growing trend in the late 1980s experimental film for "an increase in the desire by filmmakers to bring pleasure to their audience through the use of humour and storytelling."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Saul, *Canadian Avant-Garde Film in the 1990s*, York University: Toronto, 1996. p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 1

Previous experimental works dating back to the 1960s were more concerned with the mechanical apparatus of filmmaking, also known as minimalist or structuralist film. Filmmakers like Michael Snow (*Wavelength*), Paul Sharits (*Ray Gun Virus*), and Ernie Gehr (*Serine Velocity*) placed emphasis on the mechanical aspects of film such as the zoom, panning, editing, and projection; this often removed all elements of story in experimental film. With the economic shift in the mid-1980s structural films became expensive to make. These cinematic experiments were usually thirty minutes or longer following a “logical” exhaustion of the emphasized mechanical component the film was exploring.<sup>4</sup>

Story telling began to appear in experimental film as an alternative method of subverting mainstream cinema, usually with the filmmaker telling the story in voice over. In the same year as *Ger-Film*, Mike Hoolboom released his film *White Museum* (1986) where no images appear – it is just a white screen and Hoolboom’s voice telling a story. In the film Hoolboom talks about how he had no money to make any images for the film showing how economics affected film artist’s aesthetic choices. By using voice-over Saul, Hoolboom, and other filmmakers of their generation could tell a story directly to their audience as well as save some money; by not paying actors to appear in the film, by not renting expensive synchronized film cameras and audio recorders, and by not paying for extra editing time to synchronize the audio and film.

*Ger-Film*, lastly, uses animation techniques to keep the costs of filmmaking down. In animation the filmmaker has ultimate control over the film. The logistics of the production are completely known and controlled by the filmmaker. Animated films normally use the least amount of film because all the images are planned and produced before any film is shot. This makes animation some of the most economically efficient means of producing film. By using animation techniques, Saul has complete creative control and economic freedom. Saul’s films since *Ger-Film* continue to explore animation techniques or have some animation influence in them.

*I Can’t Go Home* (1987) and *The Nobb* (1989) are very short films, like *Ger-Film*, both are under two minutes. As well, both films use Saul’s paper drawings for the images – often repeating images – and voice-over and sound effects created in post-production. “Many [experimental] films are short, running under ten minutes. In almost every case, the soundtrack is recorded entirely in post production. Film was shot either outside or inside under available light. In some cases, no crew except the lone filmmaker was needed for production.”<sup>5</sup> The use of paper-based drawings, instead of the more traditional cell animation, again has an economic relation to the aesthetic of the films. Drawings done on paper are far less expensive than the precision needed to paint on celluloid (or cell). Also, by repeating shots and filming some of the drawings at two frames per drawing – opposite to the more mainstream one drawing to one frame of film. In both films Saul is the entire crew and the voice in the films making his work less costly to produce.

A second animation technique Saul explored during the same period was using photocopiers to reproduce and sometimes produce his images. *My Idea* (1987) and *Parable* (1991) use a reasonably inexpensive method of reproducing images. At cents per photocopy, the images were low-cost and had a uniquely abstract and raw aesthetic. Continuing to create work under five minutes kept his costs down while inventively creating an original low-cost aesthetic.

In 1995, Saul returned to the photocopier to create two of the cheapest films ever produced. *99 Cents plus Tax* and *For a Dollar More* were made for as much as their titles state. Saul took drawings by his partner Margaret Bassi and photocopied them on to 8.5 X 11 inch transparencies, then cut the copied drawing into 16mm strips and punched the sprocket holes himself. Unfortunately these films exist only

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these films like Michael Snow’s *La Region Centrale* (1970) was three hours long, thus using an enormous amount of film, increasing the cost of production.

<sup>5</sup> Saul, p. 11

in their original form, and because of their self-created sprocket holes these films are fragile and barely makes it through a projector – hence they have rarely been seen.

Arguably Saul's best animated film, *Doctor Watermellon and His Orchestra* (1998), combines many of the animation techniques mentioned above such as using photocopiers and hand-drawings. The photocopied images were being used primarily as backgrounds for the hand drawn characters in the foreground. *Doctor Watermellon* also adds a new animation technique to the mix, pixilation. Pixilation is used to animate inanimate object through movement created by filming the object one frame at a time. Scottish-Canadian filmmaker Norman McLaren has created the most famous films using this technique, *Neighbours* (1951). In Saul's film the pixilated object is the arm movements of the character Doctor Watermellon, where his face/body is a drawn image. Through the use of these three animation techniques Saul created an inexpensive film that is humorous and tells a good short story about the life of Siamese pickles Dill and Dell.

Saul has explored more direct methods of producing images. In *The Son of Cthulhu* (1991) Saul draws directly on to 16mm clear leader. Using markers to draw with the film has a child-like surreal feel. The images are simply drawn, just out lines and usually no more than three colours on the screen; create a raw simplicity to the film. The soundtrack is just as raw and visceral as the images, using very loud abstract sound composed in an aggressive manner. Again, the low cost animation techniques used in this film have a direct affect on the films aesthetic.

Taking objects and placing them on unexposed film in the dark then exposing the film to light one techniques used in *These are the Things I Don't Remember* (1995). This direct imaging method was originally used by photographer Man Ray and he later used it in some films he made in the 1930s. This film, like *99 cents plus tax*, exists in its original state; Saul chooses to screen the film using the original negative created. This results in a rapid moving film with colours not normally seen in cinema.

Saul returns to pixilation with the sequel to his first film *Ger-Film*, called *Ger-Film II*. In *Ger-Film II* (1991) we see the city of Regina flying by so rapidly it is almost impossible to distinguish what is being filmed. Shooting the world one frame at time, one can see life flash by. What would take minutes or hours go by in seconds. At the same time Saul is telling us a story about the places of his past, and just like the speed our brain can recall memories the images on the screen go by just as quickly. This film was shot on one roll of film, in-camera edited (like most of his animations), thus reducing the cost of his film while not compromising the aesthetics.

But not all of Saul's films have been short, like the previously mentioned. He has made films in a more traditional sense using actors and filming live action situations; but, the entire time still using primarily post-production sound techniques - like voice-over, using himself, his friends, and family as actors, and still places some animation techniques in. Saul, along with co-director Brian Stockton, created one of Saskatchewan's earliest locally produced feature films *Wheat Soup* (1987). Using voice-over and long takes the films aesthetic was dictated, directly or indirectly, by the small budget of the film. Well under the average Canadian feature film budget of one million dollars, Saul and Stockton created a quirky paced and characterized film and proved that young and relatively new filmmakers can create a feature film with a minimal budget.

Saul followed *Wheat Soup* with *Angst* (1990) and *Dread* (1992), both near 30 minutes long and shot with live action sequences. Unlike *Wheat Soup*, these films use more voice over and add in some animation techniques such as drawn images and pixilation. Both films use voice-over, *Angst* tells the story of a vampires love life told in first person, while *Dread* creatively uses the more original and less costly sounds of people talking about their fears from recordings from a telephone answering machine. Both films economically use their soundtracks to hold together the fragmented images effectively creating imaginative stories about fear and anxiety.

A new avenue Saul has been recently heading is more economically efficient than his previous work, hand-processing. Processing film at home, Saul saves on the expensive processing fees film labs charge to develop motion picture film. In addition, Saul also saves on shipping as there are no film labs in Saskatchewan – normally he would have to send his film to Calgary, Vancouver, or Toronto. This decision is not only an economic choice but an aesthetic one. Hand processing the film gives the artist more control over the image; one can stain the image with dyes, scratch the film's emulsion or process it unevenly creating abstract patterns over the filmed images, and one can use improper chemicals give a large variety of unique colour effects. The *Toxic* series (2002 – present) is Saul's first major leap into this type of filmmaking, though there are hints of it in two previous film, *Doubt* (1996) and *Twenty-five Short Film In and About Saskatchewan* (1995-1999).

The first three films in what will be a six-part series, *Begin (Toxic 1)*, *Poppa (Toxic 2)*, and *Final (Toxic 6)*, show a fruitful direction that has limitless possibilities. Like his early animation and animation influenced films the hand-processed film are following a logical path in Saul's career; always striving to make films more cost-effective without compromising the aesthetics he seeks. This economy of scale has allowed Saul to continue making films despite the rising material costs of film and reduced funding opportunities for experimental filmmakers.

## Biography

One cannot discuss Western Canadian experimental film without mentioning Gerald Saul. Based in Saskatchewan, where he is a professor of film and video in the University of Regina's Department of Media Production and Studies, Saul's work spans close to 20 years. His eclectic range of short films ranging from quirky animations (*I Can't Go Home*), expressionist surreal works (*Dread* and *Doubt*), and recent hand-processed films (*Toxic* series) has made Saul of the most creative filmmakers on the Canadian Prairies.

## Filmography

Ger-film (1986) 2 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
I Can't Go Home (1987) 2 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
My Idea (1987) 2 minutes, 16mm Film, black & white and colour  
Wheat Soup (1987) 75 minutes, 16mm Film, colour, co-directed with Brian Stockton  
Doctor Watermellon and His Orchastra (1988) 6 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
The Nobb (1989) 1 minute, 16mm Film, colour  
Angst (1990) 30 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
Parable (1991) 4 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
The Son of Cthulhu (1991) 8 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
Ger-Film II (1991) 2 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
Dread (1992) 25 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
Ger-Film III, IV, V (1993) 3 x 1 minute, 16mm Film, colour  
Crave (1994) 5 minutes, Super 8 Film, colour  
These Are the Things I Don't Remember (1995) 2 minutes, 35mm Film, colour  
99 cents plus tax (1995) 1 minute, 16mm Film, black & white  
For a Dollar More (1995) 1 minute, 16mm Film, black & white  
The Golem of Socks (1995) 5 minutes, Video, colour  
Doubt (1997) 18 minutes, 16mm Film, black & white and colour  
Persistent Visions (1997) 30 film loops  
Life is Like Lint (1999) 80 minutes, 16mm Film, colour  
25 Short Films In and About Saskatchewan (1995-1999) 80 minutes, Super 8 Film  
    1. Dance (1995) colour  
    2. The Untutored I (1996) colour  
    3. Bovine Bondage and Degradation (1996) colour  
    4. Afterwards We Had Cocoa (1997) colour  
    5. Globe Theatre (1997) colour

6. My Train Film (1997) black & white
  7. Train Leaving Station (1997) colour
  8. Brown Christmas with Colour (1997) colour
  9. Waskimo (1998) black & white
  10. A Grave Film (1998) black & white and colour
  11. Another Film About Snow in Regina (1998) colour
  12. Erections (1998) black & white
  13. Price Includes Packaging (1998) colour
  14. I Saw Red on Canada Day (1998) colour
  15. God Daughter (1998) colour
  16. Land of Living Skies (1998) colour
  17. Bread For Dependents (1998) colour
  18. Obscured (1998) black & white
  19. 84 Words (1998) colour
  20. Fred Says He'll Make a Farmer of Me Yet (1998) colour
  21. Re-construction (1998) colour
  22. Bridge (1998) black & white
  23. Banding Together (1998) colour
  24. Boo (1998) colour
  25. Heavy Machinery Has Right of Way (1998) colour
- Dream Sequence (1999) 51 minutes, 16mm film, colour, co-director
- Archipelago (2000) 3.5 minutes, Super 8 Film, colour
- Attic Playroom (2001) 3.5 minutes, Super 8 Film, colour
- Begin (Toxic 1) (2002) 5 minutes, 16mm Film, black & white and colour
- The King Who Never Napped (2002) 3 minutes, Super 8 Film, colour
- Final (Toxic 6) (2002) 5 minutes, 16mm Film, black & white and colour
- Poppa (Toxic 2) (2002) 5 minutes, 16mm Film, black & white