

Twenty Five Short Films In and About Saskatchewan
by Gerald Saul

music by Jeff Looyesen

I grew up in Regina. In the summer, the sun would blaze so brightly that we'd all have to squint while playing our games. There was no talk of sunscreen or sunglasses. The gardens in which we played during those two long months were ruled by the sky and the heat and the light.

I made this film for someone else, but it turned out to be more of a gift to myself. While capturing these images, my eyes became fully open to the colours of the land until the images finally captured me.

Between 1994 and 1996 I moved away from Saskatchewan for the first time in my adult life. I went to Toronto to further my studies in film. While there, I became re-acquainted with another ex-Reginian, John McCullough, who gave me much advise during my research. When I finished, he gave me a rare copy of Stan Brakhage's 1963 book *Metaphors On Vision*. In it, Brakhage writes "Imagine an eye unrulled by man-made laws of perspective ... How many colours are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green?' How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?" Nearly broke, I chose to make John a gift in return. This film was that gift.

As we get older, snow loses its innocence.

Like so many other aspects of our environment, we increasingly avoid the snow. We use the cold and the drifts as a scape goat, blaming it for our day to day misery. When I was a kid, after the long process of getting a snow suit on, there was no greater pleasure than lying down on the snow. Flakes would fall on my face as I sunk into its embrace. The world sparkled. In Saskatchewan, the winter is often too cold and the air too dry for good snowballs to be formed. When it was a bit warmer, we could roll up snowmen or create forts behind which we could through balls at the enemy. By the time I would get inside, my boots and mitts would be soaked and my feet, face and hands would be numb with cold. The pain of thawing was nearly insurmountable, but somehow not so bad that I'd refrain from repeating the whole thing the next day. It all seemed worthwhile afterwards when we'd get dry socks on, sit at the kitchen table and drink cocoa.

There are people who would like to believe that Saskatchewan is a land of perpetual winter.

Perhaps it is so, perhaps we never really thaw at the end of those long cold months. Saskatchewan is not known for being an outwardly flamboyant community. I get nervous when someone is too open with their thoughts and emotions, maybe because it seems that a wise person should treat their viewpoints like their parka - zipped shut at all times. Watch out, it's cold in here.

All my life I've been told that the train is very important for Saskatchewan. I've been told that civilization road on the back of this mighty institution. I've been told that the train is the lifeline, the pulse of our province. I've been told that the whistle of the train harkens us back to times of great hardship, and great accomplishments. It's funny that I had not set foot on a train until I was in my late twenties, in the last season that VIA serviced Regina. It is no wonder though. The car offers us independence, something the train never did. We drive along our highways, hour after hour passing without a break or a pause as if sheer force of will would bring the auto to its destination. If we do not arrive on time, we take responsibility. As with everything, we are uneasy with handing responsibility, and blame, to others. The train may have brought some people here, but it was destined to end with that.

We make jokes about the shortness of the spring and fall seasons. When summer ends, there are seemingly only a few days of transition before the snow flies. Even without snow, the temperatures drop so rapidly that it draws as many complaints as the worst days of winter. That's not a bad thing, this complaining, as our constant griping about the weather is pivotal to our collective consciousness. While people certainly talk about the Riders game or the taxes, every conversation which takes place within the two block radius of a shopping mall will begin with a comment on the weather. This year the fall went on forever, giving people a chance to do something usually reserved for movies -- raking leaves.

For the first time in my memory, there was no snow on Christmas.

Without snow, people didn't get into the spirit of Christmas until the day was nearly upon them. Suddenly, freed from the difficulties of the ice and drifts, everyone put up extravagant displays of lights.

Waskimo is the Regina winter fair when people come out to the park to play winter sports and create ice sculptures. Often the festivities are hampered by bitter cold, forcing people to abandon the events after short periods of time. Ironically, this year was so warm that the event had to be taken off the not-quite-frozen-enough lake and moved to the legislative grounds. I don't ever go to this and attended this time only because I wanted to shoot this film. I don't know any of these people. I didn't go to these sorts of things when I was young, my dad didn't really like playing in the cold unless it was hockey, and even that he had given up on before I was born.

I made this along with Aaron Faser and Stephen McDavid one day while exploring the advantages of super-8 filmmaking. The cameras are very small and can be easily carried and hidden. This allows the use of them in places where filming is frowned upon or even forbidden. Although permission is required, I've never known anyone

to shoot in the Regina cemetery WITH permission. I asked once and the process took so long that I just went ahead and shot there. Every filmmaker in Regina eventually comes here for a shot. It also attracts the crazies who like to tip headstones. There used to be a big hedge around the whole thing but they cut it down a few years ago, assumably so that the goings on within the area would be clearly visible from Broad Street. I got a car stuck in here once, as the driving paths are very narrow and I had to pull to one side on a slushy day like today. It took over an hour to get it out because I was unwilling to call for a tow truck in the cemetery. I don't know what I was doing there, scouting it for a location or something I think. I don't go there for any other reason. I don't know anyone buried there, or at least I don't think I do. My family moved to Regina when I was two years old and so I don't have any family beyond my immediate one here. Maybe that has lent itself to my disconnection but coinciding fascination with the cemetery. It is a tie to the past that I don't feel I have. Canadian. Resident of Saskatchewan. No cultural roots. No past, just a future which stretches out to the distant horizon, on a road as bumpy as our highways.

This is another film about Snow in Regina.

He said "The three dimensional becomes two dimensional". He said "It's important for the work that I do that the material of what's being used be given a part in what you get to see". He said "It'll be a sort of playing of all these different contexts and uses of the same image." He said "I did a photo work which involved building a great big scaffold". He said "I think there really should be an encounter with the process and the medium that is part of what you get to see". He said "You could walk on it if you wanted but most people walked around it". He said "The cows are looking back at you with that wonderfully absent look that they can have." He said "This is again an experience of extreme compression because even the sunset has become this plane which is almost non-existent". He said "One basically cancels the other". He said "It establishes the space behind in that weird kind of ghostly way that holograms can have". He said "When I was asked to show there and I was trying to figure out what to do, I decided to concentrate on aspect of my visual work which really started with the film Wavelength, which is the use of transparency". He was the world renowned multi-disciplinary artist Michael Snow and he visited Regina for the first time thanks to the Riddell Lecture and the University of Regina Film and Video Department.

We have so few reasons to look up.

This was the first time I ever attended a rodeo. Everyone looked at the action in the centre but I kept wondering about the cows waiting in the pens at the side. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept

telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for. Everyone kept telling me that the cows are happy and well cared for.

I guess I know that I belong in Saskatchewan because for some reason, watching the following process didn't bother me.

I saw red on Canada Day. Not anger or blood but passion. We don't talk much about patriotism here. I'm always torn between supporting idealist notions of a world nation, or non-nation, without borders and the more traditional approach that borders are necessary to protect our property and identity from "outsiders". Without our national boarder, our culture might be overwhelmed by the Americans and I would probably not be making this film. Without our provincial boarders, nothing would differentiate us from Ontario and we would be overwhelmed by the east and again, it is unlikely that I would be making this film. Boarders protect the weak from the strong, the small from the large, the individual from the crowd. I celebrate my ability to make this film by making this film. I celebrate my individuality by standing in a crowd without being counted. Today we feast and light fires in celebration of our borders.

Nicole is my god daughter and can be quite the angel when she wants to be.

That which makes us small, keeps us strong.

Other cities have squirrels or raccoons or pigeons. We have Canadian geese. The lake in the middle of Regina was dug by hand during the depression - some sort of make work project. The park surrounding it, which stretches on for miles, is the legislative grounds, the largest in Canada. In the thirties and forties, people could swim in the lake. Since it is fed only by a small creek, the water is quite stagnant. At the point where the creek meets the lake stands the Albert Street bridge, its two block length spanning little more than three or four metres of water. It is the world's longest bridge covering the shortest span of water. The lake bottom is thick with a sludge of algae and goose droppings. A power plant used to exhaust its heat into the lake, making a portion of it habitable all year round for the geese. When the power plant shut down they realized that multiple generations of geese had been bred to stay put here, never to seek greener pastures. They depend upon us to keep them warm all winter. They depend upon us to bring them

bread crumbs, torn into nice easy to eat pieces. They can be wonderful to see and to hear, the proud and graceful symbols of our nation. They can be nasty and shameful, hissing at each other in a manic need to gorge themselves on dry white bread.

When they first tried to build it, they ran out of money mid way through. It stood, a monolithic white elephant, with metal beams rusting under the harsh Saskatchewan sky. Virtually abandoned, it came to be a joke and an eyesore, the opposite of its noble aim. Three decades later, the scaffolds return to remind us of our times without faith. They also allow us to ponder how that which is grand was once crude.

The Saskatchewan Centre of the Arts.

The garage is as obscured as its story.

He said "There are no loose ends, at all." He said "Obviously I ain't a loose end and you're not..." He said "Always remember that if you were ever to say that I said this or that, it's a crock of garbage. It's just always deny, deny, deny." He said "There is no problem unless you do something stupid." On January 21, 1983, JoAnn Wilson was murdered in her garage. Her ex-husband, former cabinet minister Colin Thatcher, was tried and convicted of the murder.

When I was in university, someone told me that there was a rivalry between Regina and Saskatoon. Although I'd lived most of my life in Regina, this came as a surprised to me.

No one I talk to around Regina seems to be aware of this conflict either. To this day, I don't know if it's true. If it is, then perhaps it is only true to people in Saskatoon. Generally speaking, we should be the ones to envy them. They have a fringe festival, a thriving arts and music scene, and even civic pride. I don't get up there as often as I should, even less since my car was stolen last summer. Saskatchewan is a driving kind of place. That's not to say that we are good drivers or that we have good cars or good roads. I mean that most people have a car and go places by car. I didn't drive until I was eighteen - a right of adulthood I was overdue in making. My teen years were spent riding shotgun in a friend's car, up and down Albert Street. There were road trips too, but mostly to Calgary where the drinking age was lower. I don't recall ever going to Saskatoon - we saw no reason to. We didn't really know anything about it except that it was about the same size as Regina so it must be about the same sort of place. People who wish to bridge the gap between the two cities talk about an express train cutting the commute in half. It seems unlikely. Some rivers can't be crossed.

"What are those things around the trees?"
- any visiter to Regina

Unlike any other capital city in Canada, Regina is not built on a river, lake or coast. It's location was chosen through some back

room politics and is situated on a swampy piece of prairie with no real water source. A century ago, there was not one tree in this city. The city chose to plant Dutch Elm trees throughout many areas of town. Now, a number of problems have arisen due to this near monoculture. There is rampant and justified paranoia about Dutch Elm disease which has decimated other treed communities. While not as deadly, another pest also panics Regina residents. It is a moth which must walk up the side of the tree every spring to lay its eggs. Once hatched, the black, inch-worm-like larva crawl around and consumes every leaf on the tree. They also spin webs which hang down from the branches to entangle passers by. When I did not protect my trees, I could stand outside my house and listen to the crunching sound of the worms eating my leaves. The bands around the trees are suggested by the city and are made up of fibreglass insulation on the inside and plastic and tape on the outside. The plastic is coated with either grease or a sticky substance to prevent bugs of any sort from scaling the tree. I think we've also bred a generation of non-tree-climbing cats.

I only remember this story because my sister still taunts me about it. It seems that one day at church the minister began a dialogue with the kids in the congregation. I was one of them. He asked us to name the religious holidays. Certainly Christmas and probably Easter were named. In an unusually gregarious moment, I blurted out my own suggestion: Halloween.

It's as true today as it was then.

Fred grew up on this farm in a small house which still stands and has not changed much since he was a child. He still lives in it while working his fields. The whole family used to spend most of the summer out there but over the past few years that's stopped. They own a square mile of land which is called a section. It consists of 640 acres. An acre is an area one rod wide by one half mile long. A rod is 16.5 feet so there are 320 rods in a mile. When Fred grew up, they did all the work with a few people and horses. Machines have made it possible for much more work to be done by far fewer people. Fred drives the combine and every so often he has to empty the grain into a truck. Driving truck is the only other job that needs doing. I'm driving truck this year. The job consists of waiting and waiting and waiting. Then the combine unloads and fills the truck half full. Then there's more waiting until the combine returns. Now full, the truck must unload. I took the grain directly to town to unload at the elevator where they would test it and credit him for the volume and grade of the load. I inhaled a lot of grain dust and coughed for two days afterwards. Fred says that he'll make a farmer of me yet.

Saskatchewan. Home.

Twenty Five Short Films In and About Saskatchewan
by Gerald Saul

music composed by Jeff Looyen

music performed by Jeff Looyesen and Jonathan Dyck

Film lab and transfer
Exclusive Film Lab, Toronto

On-Line Editor
Brett Bell
Film Crew

Sound recording and mixing facilities
The Saskatchewan Filmpool Co-operative

Thanks to Margaret Bessai; the University of Regina Film and Video Department; John McCullough; Aaron Faser and Stephen McDavid; Michael Snow; Claude and Nettie Saul; Fred and Gertrud Bessai; Michael Grzesina; Richard Gustin; The Filmpool staff: Sherry Little, Linda Payeur, Ron Jacobs, Felipe Diaz, and Jason Neilson; Nicole Saul and my cat - Baron Munchhausen.

Produced with grants from
The Saskatchewan Filmpool
and
The Saskatchewan Arts Board

©1999

□