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Arthur Lipsett: Lost and Found

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Amelia Does joins the long-overdue assessment of one of Canada's most important, dynamic and underrepresented artists – experimental filmmaker Arthur Lipsett – by re-introducing us to the man and his work.

Arthur Lipsett's films have been screened and admired for decades but there is very little published about the man or his films. In Canadian film schools and universities, his work is studied but there is a lack of literature or analysis with which to supplement screenings. In our academy's neglect of paying Lipsett his dues we have missed out on celebrating a true genius and unique film artist who we should be proud to call our own. 2006 will be the twentieth anniversary of Lipsett's passing and there will likely be at least two documentary films about the artist released for broadcast and festival exhibition. With this growing increase in the awareness of Lipsett's name and films, it would seem now is the time to assess and seriously engage with the work of one of Canada's most important and dynamic artists.

Lost Lipsett

What kind of an artist was Lipsett?

What is Lipsett's place in art history, film history, and Canadian history?

Why have scholars ignored Lipsett's work? Have they ignored it?

"Lost and Found" because Lipsett – in so many ways, both in life and in death – has fallen through the cracks. He is often marginalized, underrepresented and unclassified. Lipsett was employed by the National Film Board of Canada for thirteen years and his films were screened by the Board, in art houses, and schools all over Canada and the world. However, the experimental quality of much of his work makes them difficult to understand in the conventional sense and it becomes equally difficult to appreciate the artist who made them. It is difficult to sum up in words what a Lipsett film is *like*: the viewing experience is almost a spiritual one. Lipsett once said "If I could say it in words I wouldn't be making films." [1] But by speaking to those who knew and worked with Lipsett we can situate the artist first in his own life and times, and then in the broader history of visual art and film.

In 1970, Arthur Lipsett was asked to leave the NFB. Institutional histories of the NFB suggest it was difficult for others to communicate with the artist. Although he was productive, his filmmaking became too personal for many of his colleagues to relate. Many of these individuals have since stepped forward to say they feel the NFB was wrong to push Lipsett away. He represented the NFB at film festivals and was frequently asked to speak at universities and art colleges in Canada and the United States. While the NFB is not to be blamed for Lipsett's quick downfall after his departure, his life nonetheless became unmanageable in the years immediately following his exit. He tried to find work as a filmmaker in Toronto, briefly moved to Victoria, and ended up back in Montreal for the last, rather unhappy, decade of his life. Lipsett committed suicide in 1986; he told his psychiatrist at the time that he "had no creative ideas left, so dying would be a good thing." [2]

And so we have Lipsett, who Donald Brittain called the only genius he ever worked with [3], an Oscar-nominated found footage filmmaker whose films are as fresh and striking now as they were forty years ago. In graduate thesis, Michael Dancsok asks why film scholars ignored Lipsett? He posits that perhaps one reason is that the films straddle the documentary and the avant-garde. Perhaps the complexity and ambiguity of the works is another reason.

Lipsett was schooled in visual art prior to his hiring at the Montreal NFB in the mid-1950s. He was the favourite student of former Group of Seven painter, Arthur Lismer. Under Lismer's tutelage, Lipsett developed into an accomplished sculptor and collagist. His affinity for the three-dimensional later translated in a unique ways to the flattened plane of film. A closer look at N-ZONE from 1970, or his own writings and film proposals [4], provides insight into the ways Lipsett sought to configure a film language comprised of shapes, experiences, and three-dimensional landscapes. He bravely explored his medium. Like the American Abstract Expressionists who transformed painting and exposed the canvas as a flat surface, Lipsett used the frame and screen as a canvas on which he presented collages of alternating, moving images that seem to rotate into the viewing environment of the audience.

Lipsett was educated about avant-garde film, art history, and the early collage artists like Kurt Schwitters. He was particularly influenced by Joseph Cornell's ROSE HOBART (1936) and Bruce Connor's A MOVIE (1958). Lipsett used his own photographs, along with the contents of the waste bins of the NFB as his sculpting materials. Like the German visual artist Joseph Beuys he attempted to use garbage materials to create a new experience for his film audience. He attempted to carry the viewer to a spiritual place. In Lipsett's collage you see a *becoming*, a desire to re-arrange and to transcend.

The Great Artist

So how do we make the argument that Arthur Lipsett is one of experimental cinema's most significant figures? Quite simply, Lipsett's use and re-invention of film language was often revolutionary. Though he remains critically unattended and popularly obscured, he did win several significant awards in his lifetime and the admiration of many luminary filmmakers, specifically Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas and Walter Murch. Lipsett succeeded in turning film on its head, taking new image and sound-image relationships – perhaps often arbitrary ones – to create a deeply personal and dynamic form of expression. He explored metaphysical aspects of the medium, occasionally beginning with refuse and producing profound experience comprised of light and sound.

Lipsett, in his films, proposals and writings, contributed greatly to the exploration of new forms of film language that clearly impacted the era within which he produced much of his work. Furthermore, the energy and technique illustrated in his films is found throughout contemporary visual media practice. Building upon Conner's ideas for found footage collage and his own investigation of sound collage, Lipsett's films achieved an emotional depth and dynamism that may leave the viewer confused and speechless, but never indifferent. We must now hope that we have the suitable perspective with which a proper and penetrating examination and analysis of Lipsett's work and contribution to cinema can begin.

Notes

¹ The narrator of this film quotes Arthur Lipsett in TWO FILMS BY LIPSETT (Donald Rennick , National Film Board of Canada, 1967)

² Dancsok, Michael. "Transcending the Documentary: The Films of Arthur Lipsett", Diss. Concordia University, 1998.

³ From interview with Donald Brittain in BRITAIN ON BRITAIN - PROGRAM 8: KING OF THE HILL, TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE (National Film Board of Canada, 1999)

⁴ Dancsok, Michael. "Notes and Proposals," Canadian Journal of Film Studies 7 (Spring 1998): 47-62.

Amelia Does, a graduate of the Film Studies program at the University of Western Ontario, is a writer and filmmaker who is currently involved with the Arthur Lipsett Project, a collection of written material, a web portal and a documentary film (directed by Martin Lavut / produced by Dennis Mohr) focusing on the filmmaker's work.

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