

Spotlight on Concordia Film Production: Mike Rollo

Mike Rollo is a Montreal-based photographer, filmmaker and professor at Concordia University. He is a founding member of the experimental filmmaking collective, Double Negative. His latest film, GHOSTS AND GRAVEL ROADS, has enjoyed a significant amount of exposure and praise this year at film festivals around the world. He was chosen by the Toronto International Film Festival Group as one of Canada's Top Ten Filmmakers (short film division) for 2008. The following interview is a mixture of two interviews, one by email correspondence and another performed in person. An earlier film of his, STILL/MOVE, is also discussed as both "are part of an ongoing study of the Canadian prairie landscape."

Amanda: What initially struck me about your two films, STILL/MOVE and GHOSTS AND GRAVEL ROADS, was how successful you were in producing two films, which, on a superficial level, appear to be on similar subject matter. That being said, through your use of subtle aesthetic differences (with sound, camera movement, editing...) you changed the atmosphere, the meaning, of the two films quite a bit.



Mike: GHOSTS AND GRAVEL ROADS is a companion piece to STILL/MOVE. Both films explore the history of my family's homesteads rooted in the family album. In STILL/MOVE, I was shooting family portraits and snapshots in movement – memory passing in time whereas the landscape was still, trapped in the present. With GHOSTS AND GRAVEL ROADS I was exploring the idea of the photograph as epitaph, commemorating a particular place and time by placing the photographs on decaying buildings

in my home province of Saskatchewan. All photographs used in GHOSTS AND GRAVEL ROADS are from my mother's family whereas the photos in STILL/MOVE were of my father's family. The aesthetic issues regarding sound, camera movement, and editing were influenced by the surrounding environment. Also, STILL/MOVE focused on the rail.

AD: I interpreted STILL/MOVE, the earlier of the two films, as having a more nostalgic, even comforting, take on the passage of time. The people in those photos and home movies seem to be so happy (and predominantly children). Is this depiction partially expressing a yearning for that kind of simplicity?

MR: This film takes on a more nostalgic point of view of a community. Perhaps it had something to do with the amount of photographs I was able to work with. My grandfather was an avid photographer and amateur filmmaker. He accumulated a huge amount of prints and home movie footage, which made it easier for me to understand and to organize the history of my father's childhood. I am also thankful that my grandfather had a great eye for composition and framing. The photos do depict happiness, but that's inherent in most photo albums where self-editing does present a dualism of emotion. We are never prone to present the bad memories on celluloid. The most interesting aspect of my grandfather's photography was the sense of motion, whether it was a body in motion, the gestural camera work, or the serial multiplicity of photographs. I was then able to animate these photographs in movement, allow the illusion of motion to present a passage of time.

AD: History, storytelling, documenting, searching for origins also seem to be themes of this film. This comes across not only through the inclusion of artifacts like old photos, but also through the staging of yourself holding these pictures in your hand for the camera throughout the film.

MR: The film attempts to mark a history through the process of photography, by using the snapshots of the past as a backdrop to the landscape.

AD: The sequence of you filming yourself in the broken window is also a conscious act of self-reflexivity. There are all of these layers of possible interpretations created through the inclusion of different types of material such as the sounds of a train in movement (from a long time ago) juxtaposed with you, the director, in the present projecting your own interpretation of past events.

MR: Yes. It's a way of justifying my presence not only as a filmmaker but also as a member of the family as well. I felt I should not be completely present in the film as the history is pieced together from these documents. The snapshots are not records of my own memories, so the radical cropping of my body, the shadows and the broken reflection serve to illustrate a belonging but not one that is concrete.

AD: With STILL/MOVE, a lot can be taken from the title of the film: how elements of being still, being in movement, tie into issues of mortality or even with the passage of time. You include still photographs that are sometimes animated, which are then put into movement by you. Occasionally, these photographs even look like tracks on a railroad while non-diegetic sounds of trains in movement play. Your film is full of examples like these, which also play into the overlapping of memory, history (the past) from the present.

MR: That's a great observation. The formal structure of the piece focused on the dynamics between the interplay of animated photographs and the stillness of the landscape.

AD: Much action, or movement, even life, is created by your manipulation of shots. This is a bit disconcerting because it comes across as though the railroad, this now isolated town in Manitoba, carried so much meaning to these people. To see it now abandoned and in shambles, and in knowing that this place that held so much importance to these people, is somehow revived by having you return there.

MR: This was my father's hometown when he was very young. Both my great grandfather and my grandfather worked for the railroad as conductor and dispatcher. While my great grandfather worked in Winnipeg, my grandfather worked in Sprague where the film takes place. It's a very small community – still active, but the old railroad station no longer exists.

AD: I was wondering why you chose to switch from color to black and white so early on in the film.

MR: I wanted to play with the materials. I felt that simply documenting the landscape in color appeared too constructed, too artificial. My intent was to remind the audience of the act of photography, and that I am recording a place in time. There is an awareness of the apparatus throughout the film such as the change of color, the flares from the end rolls of film, the reflections and shadows of me filming.

AD: Sound is probably the most noticeable element that changes the tone between the two films. In STILL/MOVE, it helps to create this sense of movement that is not really present any longer in the mise-en-scene, in the place you're documenting. At the same time, it helps create a sense that the past is still somehow present in the present.

MR: This relates back to my intention of having the present and past cohabitate in the same image. Sounds of the past will drift in the present and vice versa.

AD: I found that with GHOSTS AND GRAVEL ROADS, the soundtrack made it really creepy to watch. It was a lot like a horror film. It seemed to be grappling with some darker, angsty existential dilemmas than the previous film. I had the impression that the theme of this film was more about the conflict between humankind, or community, with nature. Moreover, I had interpreted it as being a commentary on the fruitlessness of human innovation in the face of inevitable mortality.

MR: Stephane Calce conceived the sound design for the film. Heavily influenced by composers Bartok and Legeti, Stephane evoked the minimal sounds that exist in this open space. He also wanted to create a musical entity of the wind, a chorus of voices that shift and float from one image to the next. There are also sound cues and metaphors in the film. For example, incorporating the French prayer over the image of the photograph of children praying. This sound serves two purposes – one being a literal auditory cue of the photograph and the other, metaphorical, in which the prayer functions as spiritual blessing, a last rite, to the decaying landscape.

The catalyst for making GHOST AND GRAVEL ROADS was my mother's family album from when she was young. There weren't as many of photos to work with as there were for still/move.

Since my paternal grandfather was an amateur photographer, I had a lot to work with. It was easier to channel a history through that and to organize the production side of it, and to place those photos in their settings. It was also more difficult to recreate a history for GHOSTS AND GRAVEL ROADS using this method because the photography I did have at my disposal was very strange. All of the figures were ghost-like, there were washed out backgrounds, faces were blurred ... they almost seemed like traces, or drawings of sorts. That made me think of how they were similar to these dilapidated houses, these skeletal forms that exist in these wild, open landscapes. I intended to follow a similar process as in STILL/MOVE except I became frustrated and anxious. So, the act of frustration comes out in the film, which is an act of self-expression.



I wanted to go to these ghost towns and to document them as they are. I didn't want to have any attachment to them. The more poetic style of the film was meant to invoke contemplation and reflection. I didn't want it to be didactic. I never explain that these are photographs of my mother's family. These could belong to anyone. It happens to a lot of other people, other families.

AD: How much preparation did you do before shooting? How did collaboration function with your thematic intentions?

MR: With this film, I did a lot of research at the Saskatchewan Archives. I researched the towns' histories, what made them ghost towns. I then traveled around with my partner, Amber Goodwyn, and began talking with people, local farmers, who were either residents of these ghost towns or who lived in communities that were not too far from them. I could've done a run-of-the-mill documentary – what happened here, what happened there – but I didn't feel that was necessary because I think the images stand on their own and that they're very evocative. They present a power by themselves. If I had introduced a voice-over, it would've shifted the focus onto more minimal things.

AD: So, it's more about the mood?

MR: Yeah, that's what I wanted to concentrate on. On my second trip, I brought Terry! Loffler, who had a fresh perspective of shooting the landscape. It was a week and a half of shooting.

AD: Where did you stay? These are ghost towns.

MR: We mostly stayed at convents in nearby communities. Many of them have been transformed into B&Bs. They were great. They've basically dug some of these communities out of collapse.

AD: Did staying in convents have something to do with this idea of photograph as epitaph?

MR: There are a lot of religious metaphors and sounds. The soundtrack itself is very divine. I know a lot of people find it really dark, but there's this idea of spiritual blessing that kind of becomes a motif throughout, and the photographs are pinned on structures [...] which represents care on my part, represents a history shared by a lot of people in Saskatchewan, for people like my mother's family who were pioneers, who did work very hard, who were very poor, who were farmers – this is a kind of respect for their own memory and history.

AD: Like an ode?

MR: Yes, very much. That's why I wanted to use photography to commemorate these towns. The photographs themselves are very odd, and they even represent death ... but more the schoolchildren photos. There's an emptiness, an absence, even a touch of sadness. I think this worked well in contrast with the landscape where there is a sort of melancholy, or sadness, but the remains are still there. I find that very touching.



The two main institutions in these communities were the farming co-ops and the Church, which is one reason why I wanted to go with a religious tone for the film. The sound of the Our Father in French is very ghostly, but it becomes this presence that weighs down on the emptiness of this house. Towards the end, the chanting voices become a meditative outlook on what's happened and what's there for the future.

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3. Queering the Québécois and Canadian Child in Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*
4. Queering the Heterosexual Male in Canadian Cinema: An Analysis of Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*
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