CFMDC
Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre

STUDY GUIDE

ROBERTO ARIGANELLO SPOTLIGHT SERIES

CONTENTS

LONG LIVE THE FILMS OF ROBERTO ARIGANELLO

When people watch a film as films are meant to be seen—as physical material spooling though a projector, illuminating a screen in a public space—they often exit at what is arguably the most significant moment: during the closing credits. This simple act of not paying attention, of leaving, is often unintentional. Rather, decades of socialized cinema going have conditioned the well-meaning audience member to not bother much with what happens after "the end," following the conclusion of the film's narrative.

Unfortunately, far too little value is placed on the labour of the skilled workers that come together to create the light that shines before your eyes, beyond the names on the marquee. And yet, on the vibrant artist-run fringes of the decaying cinema industry formerly known only as "Hollywood," people often work in conditions beset with great personal and financial sacrifices. All because of their beliefs: in what they want to communicate through their creative work; in the value of sharing their personal expression with the outside world; and, most importantly, in the importance of media arts communities (of artists and audiences alike) that their collaborative actions and exchanges help to construct. One frame at a time, 24 frames per second.

Roberto Ariganello is an artist whose name appears in the end credits of others' films far more frequently than his name appears in his own. That is because, first and foremost, Ariganello was a passionate believer in film in the sense conveyed above. He lived his far-too-short life to the fullest as—in the words of his colleague and friend Deirdre Logue—"a pathological giver." For Roberto was always quick to put his own projects aside to help others at various conceptual and/or technical stages of the making of their own films. He did this in his capacity as Executive Director (and earlier as Technical Coordinator) at the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT), but also as a fellow artist, mentor and all-around film enthusiast, in the community he was introduced to in the mid-1990s by his friend and collaborator, Chris Gehman.

As for Ariganello's own films, there are six finished ones in existence, each one of which embodies, in its own accomplished way, his overall passion and commitment to the act of *making* film. The emphasis on the word "making" here is meant to draw attention to two integral and inseparable characteristics of all of Ariganello's work: in how his films are processes that, when experienced, exhibit his profound interest in artistic collaboration and technical experimentation. Notably, four of Ariganello's six films were made in tandem with two different filmmakers: *Non-Zymase Pentathlon* (1995) and *Contrafacta* (2000), with the aforementioned Chris

Gehman, plus *Lotería* (1996) and *Gesture* (1999), with Federico Hidalgo. Another work, *Shelter* (2001), was commissioned for the Pleasure Dome film and video exhibition group's project "Blueprint for Moving Images in the 21st Century." *Yesterday's Wine* (1999) rounds out his body of productions, which concluded upon Ariganello's untimely death in August 2006 at the age of 45, though he was working on a personal experimental documentary about his immigrant grandfather.

The collaborative relationships with Gehman and Hidalgo inform the making of each of Ariganello's films and are visible upon viewing in terms of how they influence and shape each project as a whole, but also as a life's work. In the two films with Gehman, for instance, one can see a dedicated attention to detail on the part of the filmmakers as far as stop-motion animation technique is concerned. This is exhibited by the playfulness in the interaction between images, as well as with the complementary non-diegetic sound, to humorous effect. *Non-Zymase Pentathlon* is just shy of six minutes of post-modern cinematic bombast, enacting a more whimsical take on the 1960s collage films of the National Film Board's Arthur Lipsett, and his critiques of the perils of post-War capitalism. Similarly, *Contrafacta* operates as a medieval post-modern narrative, as it were; events and images do not connect to create simple meanings but, instead, serve to hint at "supernatural" happenings promised by the very creation and witnessing of the filmic image itself.

As for the two films made with Hidalgo, Ariganello assumes a role more traditionally defined as "cinematographer," and his aptitude for composition, lighting, and camera movement is skillfully on display throughout. Both works with Hidalgo are to "the real" what the films with Gehman are to "the fantastical," and are keenly aware of the cinematic traditions from which they emerge. Each draws extensively, in style and structure, from neo-realism and observational documentary, while the function of Hidalgo's narrator in *Gesture* operates to construct a story of a not-so-distant future-present, not unlike in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). In *Lotería*, an interesting effect is produced by the series of interviews with subjects we hear but never see; instead, viewers experience these voices while surveying inner-city markets and streets through the lens of Ariganello's handheld 16mm film camera.

As for the two films credited solely to Roberto Ariganello, there is a pronounced attention to the materiality of images themselves and how their manipulation can shift meanings, if not create new ones entirely. In *Shelter*, which is constructed wholly from found footage—be it of a 1960s Pierre Berton telecast, or an Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) pro-public housing demonstration during an Atom Egoyan Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) premiere—meanings are mixed up at the level of montage, most notably near the film's conclusion, when contrasting images vie for the audiences' attention in split screen. The effect of B-movie footage appearing in tandem with other more "realist" footage is a jarring one, intensified when the film returns to its own beginning with the presentation of decayed film and its choppy, sonic equivalent.

Not unlike in his works with Gehman, the intent in Ariganello's two "solo" films is to explore relationships between the visible and the audible, including the ways in which audiences conventionally assume and confuse smooth, naturalized correlations between the two spheres of audio-visual representation. Coherence and understanding, of course, are never entirely realizable, though they are often perpetuated as false goals by mainstream narrative film. What André Bazin called "the myth of total cinema" is a popular fallacy that Ariganello explores in all of his works, but arguably most astutely in *Yesterday's Wine*. This 1999 film, like *Shelter* later on, is made up of appropriated images (in this case, from crime and horror B-movies from the mid-20th century) and incorporates a soundtrack built from instructional language tapes. The theme of (mis)communication pervades the piece, as over the course of ten minutes an allegory regarding the inadequacies of words and images unfolds, creating an absurdist narrative that investigates the very nature of cinema as a medium of life. And, ultimately with life comes death as well, for the film has an uncanny moment where the image of a werewolf slowly returns to a more human state of being; all the while, the two disjointed language tape narrators posit: "We are going to live a long time/our days are numbered."

And now, thanks to the CFMDC's Artist Spotlight series, more audiences will be introduced to and be inspired by the life and passion of Roberto Ariganello, a boundless energy that is exhibited in the films that he left behind, in the projects that he assisted his peers in completing, and in the end credits still waiting to roll.

James Missen

QUESTIONS

1. William Wees has noted that found footage films "draw attention to the body of the film itself, to the film's own image-ness." In what ways are Ariganello's found footage and animated collage films self-referential? How do they draw attention to the ways in which films are constructed?

2. In their re-use and re-contextualization of images from mainstream media and popular culture, found footage and collage films are often seen as a form of media critique. Discuss how they might function this way, with specific examples from Ariganello's films. In particular, how is the use of the collage format related to the themes of *Shelter*?

3. Discuss the relationship between the sound and image tracks in *Yesterday's Wine*. For example, provide some instances in which the juxtaposition between sound and image creates humour. How is this achieved? Are there instances in which the juxtaposition creates an alternate effect?

4. In what ways are *Non-Zymase Pentathlon*, *Contrafacta*, *Yesterday's Wine* and *Shelter* linked to the aesthetic interests of Dada*?

5. Is there an underlying message or theme to *Lotería*, or is it purely observational? If there is a message, how is it drawn out through the formal elements of the film?

6. How are fictional and documentary elements blended in *Gesture*? Do you find the combination compelling, or is there one thread that interests you more than the other?

RESOURCES

Ades, Dawn (ed.). *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

International Dada Archive. www.lib.iowa.edu/dada.

Wees, William C. *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993.

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* Dada was a dissident art movement that arose in Europe after 1915 as a reaction to the First World War. In opposition to bourgeois values and a culture of reason that were seen to have paved the way to war, Dada stood for irrationality, anarchy, spontaneity and individualism. Dada artists wanted to produce an alternative, critical and playful vision of the world which would challenge the dominant mode of thinking. Collage was used as an "anti-art" art form, bringing together disparate sources and materials not generally considered proper to art, and subverting their original intentions. Dada philosophies and practices are a key influence on the sub-genre of found footage.

FILMOGRAPHY

Shelter, 16mm, 2001, 8 min.
Contrafacta, 2000, 16mm, 15 min. (co-produced with Chris Gehman)
Gesture, 1999, 16mm, 14 min. (co-produced with Federico Hidalgo)
Yesterday's Wine, 1999, 16mm, 10 min.
Lotería, 1996, 16mm, 22 min. (co-produced with Federico Hidalgo)
Non-Zymase Pentathlon, 1995, 16mm, 6 min. (produced with Chris Gehman)

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

After graduating from Ryerson University with a degree in Media Studies, Roberto Ariganello made films both independently and in collaboration with Chris Gehman and Federico Hidalgo. His work as a filmmaker and photographer has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues including Cinematheque Ontario, Millennium Film Workshop and Media City.

Ariganello was very active in the Toronto independent film community, first as Technical Coordinator and then Executive Director of the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT). He also worked and advocated on behalf of media artists through his involvement with organizations such as the CFMDC, Pleasure Dome, Cultural Careers Council of Ontario (CCCO), and the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA). Roberto passed away unexpectedly in a tragic swimming accident in the fall of 2006.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Missen was recently the Cultural Policy Advisor at the Canadian Conference of the Arts (CCA), Canada's largest national advocacy organization for the arts and cultural industries. He has also been a part-time instructor in experimental film, video art, and new media in the School for Studies in Art and Culture (SSAC) at Carleton University, Ottawa.

James has published various scholarly papers and has participated as a speaker at numerous academic conferences throughout Canada. He was an Ontario regional representative on the board of the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA, based in Montreal, QC) and was also a founding member of the Editorial Working Group for www.culturescope.ca. James holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film and Video (Honours, Screenwriting) from York University, as well as a Master's Degree in Film Studies from Carleton.

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