

One of a new generation of experimental filmmakers is dead. Henry Jesionka, 29, collapsed yesterday afternoon in his studio, leaving behind him a body of impressive work that has yet to be fully analyzed by scholars around the world.

According to close friends and relatives, Mr. Jesionka had been depressed for a number of years. During that time, he was overtaken by what doctors now refer to as "Post-Production Syndrome", a recent but advancing disease that has inflicted a sizeable portion of the avant-garde community.

In daring works such as *Resurrected Fields*, *Synapse* and the ever-popular *Spatial Comparisons*, Mr. Jesionka developed and employed interesting machines and gadgets to promote the postproduction arena as the most developed and sophisticated process in media today.

Just before his untimely death, he was at work with the renowned Austrian artist Peter Weibel. Working night and day in their dingy loft inside the royal palace in Vienna, they devised the "Optic Matrix Depth-Arranging Proton Roll Machine", the first instrument that translated "outer reality" into "inner doubt".

In layman's terms, the device converted abstract notions into cold cash.

HUMBLE ORIGINS

Born in Welland, Ontario, Mr. Jesionka grew up in a small city known for its bingo games and local taverns. It was a place that had never produced a genius before. During one night in 1943, however, a local barber was arrested for firing a shotgun at the public library, believing it to be a platoon of German paratroopers landing in the field.

It was this same barber, Vito Innocenzi, who

would later become his mentor and friend.

In the shadow of the war and in the year of Sputnik, Henry Jesionka was born. Like the concerned Vito the Barber, he would learn to manipulate his surroundings and exploit them in a playful manner.

VISITS WITH VITO THE BARBER

Young Henry would save up his nickels and dimes, which he stole from his self-reverential parents, for his monthly trips to Kingston, where Vito the Barber was in prison. The fare in those days was only \$2.75. He would later remember this fare in his whimsical masterpiece: *Two Dollars and Fifty Cents: The Energy of Slaves and Their Castration Inside the Letter R*.

Mr. Jesionka, up until his untimely death, never lost faith that Vito the Barber was innocent. It kept him alive through his most tortured years. He believed that Vito actually did see the German paratroopers, and that the barber's sighting predicted the invention of the cordless electric shaver in 1971.

Mr. Jesionka was convinced the cordless shaver was intended to redesign tribal man by merging the transportation systems of the Spanish Inquisition into the "spots of time" of the Romantic Age. With the tactile grimace of the safety razor gone, acoustic man could examine horizontal space and redefine his shaving in accordance with vertical myth.

This is what Vito the Barber saw on that night in 1943. The horizontal burden of the print medium (the public library) and the emergent vertical descent of the electric shaver (the German paratroopers) causing an invisible cataclysm that could only be witnessed by the survivors of the Middle Ages.

And yet the villagers thought the barber mad.

YEARS OF FAILURE

Long before arts councils and galleries around the world hailed Mr. Jesionka as a dynamic hero of post-production, years were spent in misery and poverty. Without money to purchase film, he spent long evenings walking through the Portuguese section of Toronto with his dark cloak and pillbox hat.

On walking through the Kensington market one afternoon, he studied the texture of a large Atlantic tuna. He noticed with wonder that its scales in the sunlight approximated the molecular strategy of an old newsreel he had once seen, describing events leading to a shortage of wheat in the Ukraine.

Without hesitation, he embraced the tuna in his arms and raced down Spadina Avenue, shouting undecipherable things to the rush-hour traffic.

It was an afternoon that the history of film would never forget.

THE WORLD MEETS SAMUEL SARGENT, THE TUNA, THE ESSENCE

In his dank tenement flat off King Street East, Mr. Jesionka cared for the dead fish for many months. By freezing the tuna with what common housewives refer to as ice, and by applying his own secret solution to its scales on an hourly basis, it soon developed an aura which continued to astonish him.

With his Norelco cordless shaver, he scaled the fish three times a day. By heating the scales with a propane torch while adding carefully measured amounts of grain that he had sent to him from the Soviet Union, a fluid was extracted that would later harden.

Between the cooling of this fluid and the deposits it formed, Henry Jesionka, one cold November night five years ago, discovered the

essence of cinema itself.

Again he took the tuna into his arms, and this time he named it Samuel Sargent.

THE CITY AS A FILM, THE FILM AS A CITY

In the months ahead, Mr. Jesionka diligently applied himself to the task of securing a future for the essence of cinema. He believed Samuel Sargent would replace the fraudulent films that played in theatres around the world.

He had cinema. He had Samuel Sargent. And he had a plan.

He would walk the streets of Toronto at night, applying several canisters of Samuel Sargent to all buildings, billboards and houses that he would come across. The city itself would be the only movie screen necessary.

But when the city woke, it was still the same. The population had ignored the transformation. The streetcars again gathered up the throng, and placed them inside of the Eaton's Centre.

And by the Eaton's Centre, Henry Jesionka sat down and wept.

Enraged that the essence of cinema *could not be seen*, Jesionka suffered a collapse. When he rose from the floor, he poured all of Samuel Sargent back into the large tuna. He would now refer to both the fish and the essence of cinema as Samuel Sargent, Jr.

This would be his tragic mistake.

SUCCESS AT LAST

Convinced he was broken and defeated, Mr. Jesionka developed serious problems. He could no longer communicate with the world around him. His only conversation was with Samuel Sargent, Jr. They became inseparable companions.

In the back of movie theatres, Mr. Jesionka's filmmaking peers would sometimes notice him, offering popcorn to the dead fish he loved so dearly.

HENRY JESIONKA, FILM



Suddenly there was a change.

The Centre for Media Study, a department of the State University of New York at Buffalo, had heard of Mr. Jesionka's remarkable discovery and invited the fish and his friend to teach at the university.

On one hot summer day, Mr. Jesionka and Mr. Sargent packed up their modest belongings in an old Toyota and drove to Buffalo. To avoid immigration problems at the border, Mr. Jesionka placed the fish in the trunk of the car. When he was asked if he had anything to declare at the border, he remarked: "I have nothing to declare but the essence of cinema itself," and drove away.

At the Center for Media Studies, his life appeared to have the exterior trappings of success. With financial backing from the institution, he and Samuel Sargent, Jr. were wined and dined in accordance with state-of-the-art technology.

The works of art that Samuel Sargent, Jr. produced during this period were hailed as avant-garde masterworks around the world. But one day as Mr. Jesionka gazed into the eyes of the fish, he knew the essence of cinema was gone.

He knew what he had to do.

As faculty and students tried to stop him, Mr. Jesionka unstrapped Samuel Sargent, Jr. from the operating table in the digital arts laboratory, and like that day on Spadina Avenue, he embraced the fish and ran with it.

Several hours later, he found himself in a field outside the city. In the shadow of a green hill, he placed Samuel Sargent Jr. on a slab of stone.

It was then that Henry Jesionka stabbed the fish to death with a pair of barber's scissors.

The sky turned dark and for the rest of that afternoon, it rained. The essence of cinema

poured down from the clouds. Traffic on a nearby highway came to a stop as drivers and their passengers climbed out of their cars and witnessed the greatest film ever made.

THE HORROR, THE HORROR...

After the death of Samuel Sargent, Jr., Mr. Jesionka fell victim to a relentless series of nightmares. The fish was dead but its spirit took form in his subconscious, and it was in these dreams that Samuel Sargent III was born.

Before his collapse yesterday, Henry Jesionka would never have a moment of peace again.

BUT HENRY JESIONKA LIVES ON IN THE FAMILY OF SARGENT

Standish Sargent; Stephen Sargent; Sidney Sargent; Sarah Sargent; Soren Sargent; Sylvia Sargent; Siegfried Sargent; Susan Sargent; Samples Sargent; Sonja Sargent; Samantha Sargent; Sylvester Sargent; Sebastian Sargent; Sabrina Sargent; Seth Sargent; Sinbad Sargent.

INTERVIEW FROM PRISON: JESIONKA WITH VITO THE BARBER

Jesionka: So you saw the paratroopers landing in the field. What did you do next?

Vito: I yelled out to my wife that the Germans were landing. She said that I could either phone up the police or else write a poem about it.

Jesionka: I guess you should have written the poem.

Vito: Well, I did write the poem first. I thought that if I could get the incident down on paper, it would be evidence that the event actually happened.

Jesionka: Was it a very good poem?

Vito: I had never written a poem before. I mean, I was a barber for fuck's sake. But it just poured out of me, like Yeats' wife on her honeymoon.

But for a first attempt at Spenserian verse, it wasn't completely offensive to the ear.

Jesionka: Why didn't your poem prove to the jury that the Germans had landed?

Vito: Rotten luck. I couldn't write a poem about the German landing. It seemed obscene to me to write something so immediate, so literal. What I wrote about was a young woman I had seen when I was fourteen. She had beautiful blond hair and she carried a parasol even though it was winter and it was snowing. I called it *The Paradox of Parasol* or something like that.

Jesionka: And so the poem was used against you.

Vito: Exactly. The jury thought that if I had seen the Germans, why would I write a poem like that.

Jesionka: Did anyone on the jury like the poem?

Vito: There was a woman who liked aspects of it, the cadence I think. But she wrote a nice letter to me after I was convicted, saying that the prosecuting attorney ruined it by his reading. It was like Jack Lemmon pretending to be Ezra Pound, she thought.

Jesionka: Are you allowed to deconstruct in prison?

Vito: How could you avoid it? It keeps you out of trouble when you admit to yourself that the warden's system of terror is only his self-reflexive pivot by which his reign is resolved in repeating signs.

Jesionka: Could my death have more meaning than my life?

Vito: If your last name was Sargent, it might. You might have sacrificed yourself and delivered them... Perhaps the diffusion of the author is such a case... perhaps as well, the more you call attention to the author, whether or not it is to break down his authority, actually increases his power and mystique even more.

Jesionka: How do I avoid power and mystique?

Vito: You become a prisoner.

Jesionka: What if I can't live as a prisoner?

Vito: Then you die as a tyrant.

Jesionka: Is there anything in between?

Vito: You're asking the wrong man.

Jesionka: Who is the right man?

Vito: How should I know? I wasn't even right about the Germans.

Jesionka: Then you knew it was the public library after all?

Vito: If I answer that question, it would kill me.

Jesionka: Then you're not a prisoner after all.

Vito: This is getting... too deep for me... it's like that damn fish of yours... You could walk out of this prison and see a dead filmmaker sprawled out on the sidewalk. It could be you or me. The woman with the parasol could come by. She could wrap her hands inside your wounds to feel if they are actual or metaphoric. Though I think if they are strictly metaphoric, her interest in you might subside.

Jesionka: What kind of films do you like?

Vito: The one I just described.

Jesionka: Can you make films like this in prison?

Vito: I just did... it makes no difference to me what is words, what is film, what is not words, what is not film. You'd have to phone up *After Image* to find out for sure...

Jesionka: You said last time I was here you were only interested in rock and roll now.

Vito: I've been a barber. I've been a poet. I've been a prisoner. Rock and roll, yes, it would make sense.

Jesionka: I think my metaphorical death is worth more than your actual death.

Vito: It was that damn fish that killed you.

Jesionka: Samuel Sargent was never a fish.

Vito: I wish this conversation would end immediately, or else go on forever.

MAKER IS DEAD AT 29

by Fritz Bacher

