REVIEW ESSAY: PACKING, UNPACKING, AND REPACKING THE CINEMA OF GUY MADDIN

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REVIEW ESSAY


PACKING, UNPACKING, AND REPACKING THE CINEMA OF GUY MADDIN

Guy Maddin is Canada's most unusual filmmaker. He also happens to have a global cult following for his retro b&w films. His stature as a cult filmmaker began almost a quarter of a century ago, when his sophomore film, Tales from the Gimli Hospital (1988), was launched at a midnight screening in New York that drew audiences for a year. A Winnipegger by birth, he has become that city's most famous filmmaker and one of the few Canadian film directors with an international following. His New York debut led to a regular stint in the 1990s as a film commentator in The Village Voice, which in turn led to a literary career of sorts. He went on to publish From the Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings (2003), a combination of his "journals" and assorted other pieces, and Cowards Bend the Knee (2003), which combined the "script" from the film of the same name with essays on him and an interview with him. He repeated the Cowards format with My Winnipeg (the book) in 2009.

His willingness to write personally on his films and the filmmaking process makes him a special case of Canadian auteurism. It also suggests that control of both visual and textual elements of a film, which define the auteur director, allowed him to create a genuinely unique body of work. The recent spate of academic studies on Maddin that are discussed here (plus his own text on his 2007 film My Winnipeg) points to the complementary nature of word and image in his work. He has not only created a cinematic legacy distinct from that of any other filmmaker in the world, but he has also created a literary footprint that tracks that legacy and coyly deconstructs it. Truth, for Maddin, whether it be in film or in text, is a marvellous fantasy that his devout followers have enjoyed for two decades.

He is known for the uncanny re-creation of archaic modes of film from the period of silent and semisilent black-and-white cinema. Drawing on the film traditions of the 1920s and 1930s, both American and European, he has forged an anachronistic cinematic style that infuses an outdated aesthetics and lost rhetorical modes with a postmodern sensibility echoing the historical evolution of his native city. When grain was king, Winnipeg was Canada's third largest city and an economic powerhouse. Today it is an urban Canadian backwater whose glory has long faded. This historic rise and fall parallels Maddin's own efforts at resurrecting
the filmic glory and discourse of the past in a mood of extreme nostalgia. He recreates exaggerated visual tones and narrative excesses reminiscent of the first thirty years of cinema history. For most audiences these long-gone rhetorical devices are difficult to decipher.

Maddin had been an auteur feature filmmaker for over a decade before academic criticism of his films began to appear in 1999, and not until this century has this criticism expanded into a significant body. The four recent books on and by Maddin are an acknowledgment of how important his art has become to Canadian cinematic identity. For a quick taste of Maddin's cinematic oeuvre one should first turn to Playing with Memories: Essays on Guy Maddin, edited by the youthful David Church, a PhD student at Indiana University, who has compiled the first-ever collection of scholarly writings on various Maddin films. He brings together fifteen essays published between 1999 and 2009 that provide both an overview of Maddin's work as well as detailed studies of specific films. There was an earlier collection by Caelum Vatnsdal (Kino Delirium: The Films of Guy Maddin, 2000) that offered Maddin's own take on his films rather than a critical analysis.

Church's volume offers insights by scholars from the United States, Canada, and Australia, making it an international collection. That so many American film scholars have contributed to the book is indicative of Maddin's stature in contemporary filmmaking. Among the book's highlights are Donald Masterson's "My Brother's Keeper: Fraternal Relations in the Films of Guy Maddin and George Toles," Saige Walton's "Hit with a Wrecking Ball, Tickled with a Feather: Gesture, Deixis, and the Baroque Cinema of Guy Maddin," and Bill Beard's "Maddin and Melodrama."

Masterson's contribution is important because it highlights the centrality of the collaboration between Guy Maddin and George Toles, a professor of film studies at the University of Manitoba, in the creation of Maddin's body of work. Toles has received cowriting credit on a number of Maddin's films, and Masterson shows how this long-term collaboration, comparable to that of the Coen brothers, has worked creatively. Masterson addresses an important issue when he tries to decipher how much of a film is Toles's subconscious and how much is Maddin's. While there is no definitive answer, it is clear that the imaginations of these two men are so closely intertwined that the perennial themes of sibling rivalry that permeate the plots of Maddin's films are rooted in a dual autobiographical source. George Toles addresses the issue in his own contribution, "From Archangel to Mondragora in Your Own Back Yard: Collaborating with Guy Maddin," in which he discusses the method of their collaboration.

Saige Walton (University of Melbourne) provides a vital interpretative tool in her study of two of Maddin's autobiographical films: Cowards Bend the Knee (2003) and Brand Upon the Brain (2006). Her theory of the films' baroque qualities and their deixis (orientational features of language) provides some of the book's best insights. She concludes that "Maddin reignites the presentational sensuality of the baroque by privileging the expressive surface of body and film through gesture and self-conscious display" (204). Anyone who has ever tried to comprehend the archaic acting styles, film lighting, and "debased" sound and image quality that Maddin privileges will be grateful for her explanation.

A complementary theoretical approach is offered by William Beard (University of Alberta) in his essay on the melodramatic aspects of Maddin's work. Among the descriptors Beard draws on to characterize Maddin's melodrama are "childlike naïveté" (84), "retro-kitsch" (87), "reckless hyperbole" (89), and "pastiche of impossible earlier idealisms" (92). Beard's 2005 essay seeks to delve into the fundamental wellsprings of the Maddin style. The essay can be read as a precursor to Beard's major work on the filmmaker, Into the Past: The Cinema of Guy Maddin. To use a culinary metaphor, one might think of Church's Playing with Memories as a selection of appetizers or tapas, teasing the diner's appetite through a variety of tempting, but small, dishes, while Into the
Past is the grand entree on which the chef has expanded a great deal of thought and time. In terms of Maddin's work, Beard is the master chef and Into the Past his pièce de résistance.

Beard had already distinguished himself with an earlier magnum opus on the Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg, which established a whole new benchmark for studies of a single Canadian director. So when he turned his attention to Guy Maddin, expectations were high. Fortunately, he did not disappoint. Like an intrepid Boswell he has delved into every nook and cranny of Maddin's films, the filmmaker's mysterious life, and the available critical material. The result is as overwhelming as Maddin's films themselves. Written in Beard's slightly baroque style, the text provides a combination of detailed narrative description of each film along with a variety of interpretative crescendos that sometimes take the reader's breath away. Beard's verbal hyperbole and Maddin's visual excesses were made for each other.

Beard's book is illustrated with both autobiographical images of the director and stills from his films in the restrained manner typical of the University of Toronto Press film studies books, implying that what matters is the critical text. To summarize an extensive work of almost 500 pages is a daunting task. Each of the ten chapters is a study of one film, beginning with The Dead Father (1986) and concluding with My Winnipeg (2007). The chronological progression through the films allows Beard to analyze Maddin's development as a filmmaker and provide the reader with an evolutionary perspective on those films and how they reflect each other. Beard draws out common themes, dissects visual strategies, and roots his analysis in a Freudian perspective, which the filmmaker himself seems to share.

Beard does not apply a grand theory to Maddin's work (other than melodrama). Instead he links the content and style of each film to certain preoccupations the filmmaker himself has articulated in both his writings and in numerous interviews. Beard tries to root the films in the filmmaker's own psyche, or at least Maddin's public version of that psyche as displayed in his writings and pronouncements. Beard's methodology is useful in that it tries to grow organically out of the subject matter and characters of the films themselves. He then links them to the filmmaker's own traumatic family history.

A good example of Beard's approach is his discussion of the 2003 film Cowards Bend the Knee, which purports to provide autobiographical insight into one Guy Maddin. Beard describes the film as having a "surreal, fertile overprinting of past and present . . . Oedipal confrontations with the father's giant sexual member and the mother's perceived cruel and aggressive sexual appetite directed at the son" (202). According to Beard this narrative arc of "fantasy and lamentation" (217) results in "a completely painless silent film for a modern audience to watch" (218). He also believes that it is "closer to the filmmaker's fundamental source of imaginative activity than any of his films since The Dead Father" (227). Beard argues that Maddin's films are so powerfully introspective, so rooted in the wellsprings of his familial imagination that they surpass the influence of the long-lost precursors on which his films are based. One will not find poststructuralist obscurantism in Beard's text. His approach allows the idiosyncratic flavors of Maddin's films to emanate gradually and with a certain manic delight.

For the reader who has the gumption to finish Beard's substantive tour de force, rather than simply assign it to a senior course on Maddin's work to be nibbled at week after week, it is time for something lighter and sweeter. This is where Darren Wershler's playful, yet intelligent, 145-page treatment of Maddin's latest feature film—My Winnipeg (2007)—comes into its own. It offers a contrasting flavor to the previous two texts by being an extended study of a single film. Wershler defines Maddin's films as part of a "differential cinema" (3), which he says emphasizes an assemblage of elements, none of which is more important than any other. The term potpourri comes to mind, while others might prefer pastiche. While
referencing numerous culture and film critics from Raymond Williams to Marjorie Perloff, he finds the intellectual mix provided by Slavoj Žižek to be “extremely useful” in analyzing how Maddin’s “repository of fantasies” (15) works, especially in the “docu-fantasy” mode, which is how Maddin himself characterizes My Winnipeg. The film is the final instalment in Maddin’s autobiographical trilogy of films, which began with Cowards Bend the Knee, followed by Brand Upon the Brain. That Maddin has not produced a major feature film since My Winnipeg may be indicative of how much of his autobiographical genius this trilogy has consumed and how My Winnipeg serves as a capstone, summarizing many of the more salient features and themes of his filmmaking.

While Werschler uses Maddin’s own anecdotal pronouncements (the filmmaker has a penchant for giving interviews) in a manner similar to Beard, he prefers to analyze My Winnipeg from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Of particular relevance is his discussion of “The City and Circulation” in which he describes the film as representing an urban mode of seeing that combines “the believable, the memorable, and the primitive” (70). In other words the psychological dimension is key to our relationship with urban space, and that is what Maddin excels at. The memorialization of a native son’s relationship to his mother city becomes an expression of everyone’s urban relationship, wrapped in a Freudian Weltanschauung. Werschler also draws on the generic category of “city symphonies” from the 1920s as a model for this film. He concludes that My Winnipeg comes at a historical juncture when the concreteness of “the city” and “the cinema” is slipping away and that Maddin is able in this film to capture that moment when he acknowledges the failure of human desire to recapture the past by simply willing itself to do so. It all slips away into a kind of kitschy fantasy.

After Werschler’s taste-bud-stimulating dessert, one yearns for an aperitif, something more liquid and hallucinatory to end this grand Maddin meal. Maddin’s book, My Winnipeg, is a strong antidote to the academic commentary offered by the previous three volumes. Its large format and bright green cover suggest visual pleasures. Maddin has annotated the script from the film with photographs from his life and augmented stills from the film, extensive side bars of texts in which he offers “aids” to sourcing the inspiration for particular scenes, and a lengthy interview conducted by the Canadian novelist Michael Ondaajte in 2008. There are also commentaries on Maddin’s filmmaking by three individuals who have been close to the action. The book cleanses the palette of theory and replaces it with the delights of artistic fun. If one needs to get a glimpse into the workings of a film genius, then My Winnipeg is the best venue available to date. In fact, one does not have to even see the film itself. The book is a worthy substitute.

It is fair to ask why Maddin is so important to Canadian cinema and cinema in general. Here is a figure who revels in a form of cinematic anachronism by artificially submerging his films in the language of archaic silent-era precursors for which he is lauded by critics for his innovative understanding of a forgotten medium. Because his films were originally constructed in a language that audiences no longer understood, he had only a small cult following, augmented by a coterie of academic critics, who delighted in parsing his creations. His work does not propel the medium forward the way a digital breakthrough might, and it does not influence other directors to imitate his work and so launch a new school. With The Saddest Music in the World (2003) and My Winnipeg (2007) he has modified his artistic purity in a way that allows these two films at least to have sufficient vernacular power to be understood by a larger audience. Nevertheless, when Werschler characterizes Maddin’s films as “an emergent cinema that requires his audiences to consider the contexts through which his film circulates, and how that process of circulation transfigures the ‘film’ itself” (120), we are reminded of how marginalized Maddin is in terms of audience and influence.
And yet Maddin’s work has connections to a wider context. Beard is right when he argues that Maddin’s films offer a peculiarly “Canadian” sense of melodramatic sensibility. Maddin has infused his work with a strong sense of Canadian nationality and its angst over its identity. Confrontational melodramatic episodes rooted in unresolved family conflicts are what allow Maddin to mate psychoanalysis with nationality. His films suggest that Canada’s multicultural and multiracial social structure and its bilingual (English and French) status make for a confusing sense of the self. Maddin’s deeply psychosexual interpretation of communal identities emanates from the ethnic plurality of his native Winnipeg, a city whose demographic history has undergone major changes. Winnipeg’s nineteenth-century Anglo vs. French and Métis vs. settler conflicts were subsumed by a huge influx of non-English Europeans in the agrarian period; in recent times this social frame was replaced with a renewed Aboriginal fact, thereby returning the urban space to its presettler identity. Maddin, by living in Winnipeg for over half a century, has rooted himself in that specific history more substantively than any other filmmaker in the country. At the same time he has “lost” himself in the history of cinema and its earlier forms as no one else has done. By combining these two separate journeys into the past he has been able to generate a cinematic universe that is both historical and fantastic. No other Canadian filmmaker today is more postmodern and postcolonial than Maddin. In creating a retro cinema like no other he has actually caught the essence of contemporary Canadian identity as it struggles to articulate a self suited to a world where the old national-realist paradigm no longer holds. Like a pretend shaman, Maddin conjures up a miasma of historical references, alternative narratives, idiosyncratic allusions, bizarre characterization, and all sorts of locally sited incantations to create a spell over his viewers. That is how Canadians currently construct their identities in the midst of so many competing loyalties. They swim in a muddle.

Maddin has shown the world that Canadian film art does not have to be imitative of other national cinemas and that it can make significant breakthroughs when left to its own devices. His psychosexual fantasies, his deeply Freudian escapades, and his dance with memory and illusion are rooted in the Canadian cultural landscape. With only one percent of theatrical screen time in their own country, English Canadian films can display a profound sense of liberation from the demands of the marketplace that Hollywood dominates. This context allows figures like Maddin to flourish and inform world cinema with an art that could not be sourced in any other place. One does not have to be a Winnipegger to enjoy My Winnipeg because it has a universal quality of urbanity. One does not have to be a Canadian to fall into the allegorical magic of The Saddest Music in the World. One does not have to be an aficionado of silent cinema to be unsettled by the whispered nuances of Careful.

The publication of these four books is a sign that Maddin’s work has come of age. The level of recognition and critical insight they offer is indicative of his growing stature in the film canon, both in Canada and globally. But their penetration into Maddin’s work is always limited by the filmmaker’s legendary evasiveness and the clever traps he sets in his films. He is the master of the false clue. While there is more work to be done in analyzing Maddin’s films, what might help now is a text that examines Maddin’s own writings on filmmaking. The games he plays as an interpreter of his own work offer revealing clues to the films themselves.

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