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Kino Kino Kino Kino Kino: Guy Maddin's Cinema of Artifice

Sérgio Dias Branco

If Guy Maddin were a scientist, he would be a mad scientist. Perhaps, then, he is a mad artist, effusively mixing images that appear to come from the silent era and sounds that seem to come from the first talkies. The metaphor is apt —and not just because of the weird, frenzied scientist father in *Brand upon the Brain!* (2006). It is apt because it is in tune with his filmmaking, which uses archetypes, mental images inherited from previous generations that have become imprinted on our minds. Extending the metaphor, we could say that like Doctor Frankenstein, Maddin creates films out of parts, bringing to life that which has been temporarily forgotten or thought of as lifeless. His films constantly confront the ever-present risk that this monstrous creation may turn on him and destroy his art in the process. This article will briefly analyse the artifice that underpins his work, not because of its cleverness or deceitfulness, but because of the way it displays its own creation as film art and uses it as subject matter.

Maddin's films are immediately engaging and exhaustingly complex at the same time. They leave the enduring impression of a distanced, fleeting world, strangely close to our own — like a deep shadow of it. My purpose here is to reflect on this impression, giving an account of how the work of this Canadian filmmaker achieves this effect. His art may be understood as anti-naturalistic and anti-mimetic, since it does not represent our everyday life by simple imitation. *Dracula: Pages from the Virgin's Diary* (2002), a silent movie that tells Bram Stoker's tale through dramatic dance and in tinted black and white images, contains

representational elements, but the filmmaker wants us to experience and comprehend it as an intentional and artificial construction. Yet this is a type of cinema in which the representation of the world (and its creatures) and the construction based on images of the past (and its artifice) are not opposites. Both features become meaningful because they rely on the imagination and the sedimentation of memory in order to trigger recognition. This study is therefore structured around the dialectical relationships between artifice and recognition, and film and memory, which are key aspects of Maddin's filmography. In the conclusion, I will focus on *My Winnipeg* (2007), a *docu-fantasy* about his hometown (as described in its subtitle) in which these characteristics are exacerbated and made to converge. After this I will offer a few final observations.

1. Artifice and recognition

Recognition need not be seen as the elementary and direct process of identifying what we have seen and heard before. Instead, it can also be defined as a complicated and indirect way of recognizing *how* we have seen and heard. Maddin's films deliberately deviate from stylistic traditions within film, such as continuity editing, naturalistic performance, and imperceptible alterations of sound and image. Maddin has a profound understanding of these conventions, but also of the stylistic features of the first melodramas, the first sound motion pictures, and surrealist films, among others. Consider *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003): its self-conscious and humorous playing, especially between silent cinema and the musical genre, draws on the filmmaker's knowledge of film history. Set during the Great Depression, the film re-examines ideas of fatalism, despair, frustration and anxiety: against a background of social misery, the flamboyant amputee Lady Helen Port-Huntley announces a competition to find the saddest music in the world. A story with such an immoderately absurd tone demonstrates that, as Caelum Vatnsdal suggests, "Maddin's films are more or less without subtext; they're hyper-aware of their own quirks and psychogenic baggage, and it's all there on the screen with no pretense whatever to latency or to the slightest subtlety" (2000: 13). These films are composed out of separable parts, but there is a match



The Heart of the World (Guy Maddin, 2001)

between their self-conscious style and their manifest meanings, connecting stylistic artifice with semantic acknowledgment. A case in point is *Sombra dolorosa* (2004), a short film about a girl who wants to join her recently deceased father in death. The reliance on Mexican myths and beliefs is accompanied by the use of a Latin American range of warm and lively colours. This connection between cultural context and aesthetic features is apparent when the attempt of the widow to save her daughter is depicted as a wrestling match with Death (also known as the *luchador* "El Muerto").

The director often employs stylistic elements that have developed in a different technological and historical context and these become fragments that lack a linear connection. Heather Hendershot notes in an interview with Zoe Beloff, an artist who also works with a variety of cinematic imagery, that Maddin "works with 16 mm [...] also in 8 mm, even two-strip Technicolor, which is about as obsolete as you can get!" (2006: 139). She adds that his films create a disturbed vision of the past where "there's no place for nostalgia" (HENDERSHOT 2006: 140). History becomes a spectral narrative that prompts educated viewers to try to recover their own memory in order to puzzle out what they are watching. In *Careful* (1992), for example, the sets, costumes, and props, create a deliberately unnatural effect, highlighted by the over-lit and saturated photography, alternating tinted monochromes with (what looks like) worn-out Technicolor. For Maddin, images are artefacts. Simultaneously handmade and mechanically produced, they have the force of the exclamation points that punctuate every other sentence in the title cards of his films. Furthermore, as reflected in *Careful*, the artifice of performances follows the artifice of images. Vatnsdal traces the lineage behind this affected acting, arguing that

the grist for Maddin's stylistic mill comes from the early days of cinema; and his dramatic animus derives generally from nineteenth-century European literature. There is a level of tragedy which can only be expressed in broad, over-the-top terms, so melodrama, the more overwrought the better, is Maddin's primary nutritive. (2000: 13)

Similarly, George Toles, a film scholar and frequent collaborator with the filmmaker as a screenplay writer, confesses that he is "almost persuaded that the *only* way for narrative art to approach anything consequential is by accepting the following intractable condition: that art can't fully illuminate anything without falsifying or destroying it" (2001: 329). At the end of *The Heart of the World* (2001), the screen is intermittently filled five times with the word "Kino", which is Russian for "cinema". Indeed, one of the major stylistic influences of the film is the work of Soviet filmmakers. Darragh O'Donoghue calls attention to the fact that *Archangel* (1990) quotes from films like Yakov Protazanov's *Aelita* (1924), Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*, 1925) and Aleksandr Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* (1928) (O'DONOGHUE, 2004: online). This influence is more ingrained and less dependent on explicit references in *The Heart of the World*. The flickering word indicates that the film is not calling attention to cinema as artifice just for the sake of it. This revelation of the artifice of cinema through a cinema of artifice is more of an acknowledgment—a way not to conceal the *expressive power* of the film, but to affirm this power, to appeal to an audience aware of it, and to invite an *aesthetic appreciation* from this audience. It is for this reason that it would be too easy and too hasty to classify Maddin as a postmodern artist. His intentional mixing of various artistic styles, media, and conventions, does not amount to a pastiche or homage. It is not even a re-appropriation, which would imply a decontextualisation. It is, on the contrary, a return to the past *as present*; that is, a route to the discovery of the *contemporariness* of ways of looking and listening through art that are often taken as old, obsolete, and irremediably distant. In contrast, the images and sounds of these films reveal the marks of the passage of time, leading us to reconsider the power of experiencing films and the culturally situated way in which we value their expressivity. This act of valuing film, as an expressive form that conveys thoughts or feelings, comes across as fundamental. To distracted ears and eyes, Maddin's films may seem to be imitating a cinematic past that seems too remote, even archaeological. But this is a misunderstanding. He does not imitate his predeces-

sors so much as share their belief that film is an evocative and powerful tool for creating and preserving memory.

2. Film and memory

Maddin's work is marked by the intersection of various avant-garde film traditions from the silent era that reject naturalist and mimetic aesthetics. The transmission and exploration of the intricacies of human perception, feeling, and thinking, and the emphasis on the plasticity of images are related to French Impressionism. The constantly unsettling and charged atmosphere, and the use of high-contrast lighting, twisted sets, and histrionic performances are associated with German Expressionism. The dialogical structure, particularly the rhythmic and graphic articulation of images, and the quest to make a visual impact upon the viewer draws from Soviet editing and cinematic styles. Having said that, it must be added that Maddin's rejection of naturalism and mimetism does not amount to formalism. As we have seen and shall continue to see, his films do not divorce aesthetic ideas and specific techniques from thematic concerns, expressive dimensions, cultural awareness, and individual and collective history. Geoff Pevere sums up this interdependence, writing that

Maddin makes films in which form isn't merely reflexively foregrounded. He makes films that take the form (the *forms* really) as their subject. Thus, if his style strikes one as off-putting, there's little recourse but rejection. Here, style is subject. (2009: 53)

It should be clear by now that in Maddin's films memory is akin to a treasure chest that contains images and sounds, figures and notes—in short, reminiscences of cinema. He draws a blueprint of his own films when he comments on his peculiar videotape collection, confessing his love of old classical film stars like Joan Crawford and his reverence for film-



Towards Bend the Knee [or The Blue Hands]
(Guy Maddin, 2007)

makers like Ernst Lubitsch and Dziga Vertov (VATNSDAL, 2000: 137-145). He also admits to the influence of *Svengali* (Archie Mayo, 1931), a psychological melodrama about mind control, and his admiration for *The Blue Light* (*Das blaue Licht*, Leni Riefenstahl and Béla Balázs, 1932), a paradigmatic “mountain movie” that clearly influenced *Careful*. Yet memory is not just an archive, it is also a recurrent theme. In *Archangel* (1990), for instance, a Canadian officer named Boles cannot forget his dead lover, Iris, and confuses Veronhka with his lost love. Remembering is paired with forgetting in this drama set during World War I. Philbin, a Belgian aviator, does not remember his new bride Veronhka and abandons her on their honeymoon. A doctor tries using hypnosis to help both men, but is unsuccessful. The film also explores the medium as something hypnotic: Boles’s and Philbin’s memory lapses are presented through disembodied voices, recurring sounds, and blurry images. And these two male characters are no exceptions. Amnesic characters abound in Maddin’s films: Narcissa in *The Saddest Music in the World* is another example.

In recent years, the director has developed a more personal engagement with his own memories in what he calls the *Me Trilogy*. *Cowards Bend the Knee or The Blue Hands* (2003) is the first of this series of films. Guy Maddin (Darcy Fehr), a hockey player for the Winnipeg Maroons, abandons his pregnant girlfriend Veronica to be with Meta. Meta is obsessed with her deceased father and persuades Maddin to let her cut off his own hands and replace them with the stained blue hands of her dead father. Once again, the ability to remember and memory loss are thematic concerns. Meta expects that Maddin’s new hands will carry the memories of their previous body and kill her mother, her father’s murderer. Maddin ends up forgetting not only his dying mother, who he desperately does not want to forget, but also the mother of his child, Veronica (Veronhka?). This first part of the trilogy provides images of memory preserved through appearances (for example, old hockey players are preserved as wax figures). Above all, it explores the reinvention of memory through style: rapid editing, fleeting movements, repetitions and reiterations, or leaving entrancing and vibrant visual traces on the screen.

Brand upon the Brain! is the second film in the trilogy, a “remembrance in 12 chapters”. It opens with images of clocks, which mark the passing of time, and brains, which store the memories of the time that has already passed. Guy Maddin (Erik Steffen Maahs) returns to the inhospitable Black Notch Island after an absence of thirty years. What is branded upon his brain? He recalls his parents, an oppressive mother and an unavailable father, and the orphanage they ran.

The flashbacks to his childhood are a chain of fleeting images, as haunted as the man who has come home. The images are mainly in black and white, but occasionally in colour, as if connecting disparate elements or mixing the immiscible. There is no possibility of homogeneity or coherence in this depiction, which encompasses gender confusion, mistaken identity, sibling rivalry, oedipal tension, sexual envy, a whole host of ghosts and a zombie, making for an unsolvable puzzle that lays the ground for the final film.

3. His Winnipeg

In the context of a comparison between *The Saddest Music in the World* and *Cowards Bend the Knee*, James Hart remarks that “in making two very different films that complement each other so perfectly, Maddin almost seems to be asking critics and audiences to decide for themselves whether he is merely a stylish ironist or a living, breathing, feeling human being” (2004: *online*). This essay has called this dichotomy into question. There is only *one* Guy Maddin, whose fascination with old films and deteriorated copies is inseparable from his affection for the past (and from his attachment to his own past). My analysis has considered these two facets as complementary, giving singular meanings to a blend of fragments and forms. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *My Winnipeg*, the film that closes the *Me Trilogy*.

Winnipeg is the largest city in the province of Manitoba, where Guy Maddin was born in 1956 and where he still lives. It resembles the island of Black Notch in *Brand upon the Brain!* in its disconnectedness from the world. By naming the film *My Winnipeg*, Maddin inserts himself into the title and into the film, declaring that the point of view presented on this city is *his*. This time, the voice-over narration provides guidance and not just witty comments and narrative information. Mark Peikert writes that the filmmaker’s hesitant and sincere voice “manages to walk a tightrope between utter earnestness and blackly comedic irony, turning his clunkiest lines into something approaching poetry and doing full service to his zingers” (2008: *online*). Artifice is acknowledged from the start when from off-screen he urges Ann Savage, who will play his mother, to repeat a line a “little angrier”. All through this staged documentary, he says “Action!” many times before the fantasist re-enactments of his childhood in 1963 included in the film. His directions of a performance and calls for action reveal the artifice of Maddin’s work, but this should not be confused with an ingenious kind of deceit or trickery. I have been employing the concept of *artifice* in a more primitive way, and in consonance with his film art, as simply the *making of art*. Acknowledging artifice is simply a means of disclosing art as made, but made

with the purpose of producing penetrating aesthetic qualities, such as the incantatory repetition of phrases like “the forks / the lap”.

Maddin's *Winnipeg* exists in a permanent winter, with a sleepy or sleepwalking population. The film frames and intertwines the tour around the city with Guy Maddin's (Darcy Fehr) delayed train journey. He is trying to leave Winnipeg and let go of his past, but not without looking back one last time. The film is an opportunity for him to imaginatively confront, record, and recreate his real and imagined memories. By remembering and documenting this memory on film he shows how these two types of memories, real and fantasized, are entwined and fused. From this perspective, *My Winnipeg* is a point of arrival, a work that sheds new light on Maddin's whole filmography, making full use of his stylistic convictions and explaining and exploring his vision. His universe was already unique, but here it is *personally unique*, in a generous rather than self-centred way. This generosity becomes evident when he nostalgically reminisces about the community life of Winnipeg that is being thoughtlessly erased, building by building, store by store. He calls this erasure a “blasphemy” and the religious language underlines the fact that these sites, where the shared history of the city have been inscribed, were worthy of respect, almost sacred. The colour images of the present radiate sadness and emptiness. Maddin's affection is felt even when he hilariously refers to the convent school he attended as the Academy of the Super Vixens ruled by “ever-opiating nuns”.

Winnipeg comes alive in the film as though it is suddenly awakened. People and places are brought to life, like the spirits of great hockey players. Still, the resigned candour of Maddin's voice-over shows that he is aware that time cannot be turned back—perhaps only through the imagination. So he asks, “What if?” What if *Citizen Girl* were to rise from the pages of *The Winnipeg Citizen* and restore the lost sense of historical continuity? And what if Winnipeg was not Guy Maddin's hometown? The city has undoubtedly influenced his filmmaking, with its river over a river, its séances, and its reported paranormal activity. It is a place of snow fossils, skins beneath skins, old protected signs, forbidden lanes and alleyways; in short, a palimpsest similar to his films. It comes as no surprise that there are noticeable echoes of the first two parts of the trilogy. The mother who magnetically pulls him to her and to Winnipeg mirrors the bossy, enraged, and clingy matriarch in *Brand upon the Brain!* The beauty parlour where his mother works parallels the extravagant beauty shop in *Cowards Bend the Knee* or *The Blue Hands*. There are links with other films as well — the dancing sequence with an entranced Athea



My Winnipeg (Guy Maddin, 2003)

Cornish recalls the dance in *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary*. Despite this umbilical connection between Winnipeg and his films, Maddin wants to escape, to find a way out of the city. He is faced with the dilemma that closed the previous *Brand upon the Brain!*, “To stay... or to go...”. He had made his decision when he embraced his memories and transformed them imaginatively. His attempt to leave tests his bond with his hometown. Looking afresh at old family photos, he now knows that he never left, that he never really wanted to leave.

My Winnipeg, a film about Maddin's heart and his city, on “the heart of the heart”, also sheds light on the prominence of the word “Kino” in *The Heart of the World*. The word emerges as connected to the materialisation of film, that is, to that which film materialises as an affective blend of images, sounds, and, of course, words. “Kino” is *cinema*, but its presentation in *The Heart of the World* is as important as this meaning. It allows us to understand the significance of the word by treasuring its connection to the cultural heritage of cinema, through the foundational cinema of the Soviet Union. It also enables us to feel this significance more intensely because of how it appears. As an image of Maddin's filmography, this appearance is better described, not as intermittent, but as pulsating—as if we were referring to a mystifying, brooding, unwearying, giggling, throbbing heart. ■

Notes

- * The pictures that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is his responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. (Edition note.)

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