



## WINNIPEG IMAGE

### Winnipeg Saga: 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Film Commissions

By Matthew Rankin

IN OUR TIME, the images that are most readily available to us – in film, in television, on the internet – have the manufactured sameness of fast food restaurants. These images are standardized, processed and deadly. Like Styrofoam, trans fats and Ben Mulroney’s face, they are also indestructible. Once they have begun to penetrate the atmosphere, we are helpless to break them down. Werner Herzog has even made the startling claim that the proliferation of such imagery threatens our very survival as a species. All we can do is rebel, with new images that challenge our increasingly processed way of seeing the world. Without these new images, Herzog insists, the human race will die off.

In Canada, Winnipeg is uniquely poised to combat this filmic apocalypse. For if there is one place (among Anglo-Canadian film centres, *bien entendu*) where filmmakers have successfully raged against the tyranny of the processed image, it is in Winnipeg. And that, it must be said, is the achievement of the Winnipeg Film Group.

The new images we associate with the Winnipeg Film Group are born from the filmmaker’s creative response to the challenges of making films in this place: a remote, Prairie Atlantis. Each of the filmmakers chosen for the WFG’s 30th Anniversary Series - Deco Dawson, Matt Holm, Guy Maddin, Neil McInnes and Carole O’Brien – incarnates, to some extent, a different approach to the *problématique* of seizing cinematic forms out of Winnipeg’s cultural permafrost.

#### GUY MADDIN

Guy Maddin is known internationally for his inventive reworking of the obsolete tropes of film history, but his creative response to the cinematic chaos imposed by Winnipeg also makes him a visionary. What stands out in Maddin’s early films is his talent for integrating the challenges --- even the dysfunctions --- of filmmaking in Winnipeg into his aesthetic. Everything that would conventionally be thrown away as ruined film set detritus --- the oaken performances of unpaid, non-actors, scratchy soundtracks, jerry-rigged sets, bargain-basement special effects, hopeless discontinuity between shots and, above all, thoroughly degraded images --- are finally allowed their joyous, expressive homeland in Maddin’s films. Part of Maddin’s genius lies in his ability to see the cinematic potential of these “ecstatic dysfunctions,” to allow them their paradise and make of them the aesthetic tropes of

his storytelling. Few other WFG directors have been as bold as Maddin in this regard, except perhaps Barry Gibson in his brilliant, continuity-renouncing tennis movie, *Doublefault* (1988).

Maddin's love for the divine fuck-up has resonated deeply with Winnipeg filmmakers. In recent years, filmmakers John Kapitany and Solomon Nagler have led a veritable revolution in Winnipeg-style image degradation by introducing the WFG to the cheap and potentially disastrous methods of processing 16mm film by hand. This new-found zeal for images devastated by chemical atrocity could only be rooted in the influence of a filmmaker like Maddin, who would welcome a spidery hair to wriggle in the gate throughout much of his *Sissy-Boy Slap Party* (2004).

In *Odin's Shield Maiden* we see all the excessive elements of his recent work, particularly the dog's-breakfast-montage he has developed with editor John Gurdebeke. This wild, fractal-patterned chaos cutting reached its apotheosis with Maddin's silent feature, *Brand Upon the Brain!* (2006), which, unfathomably, traces its narrative action through a delirious multi-cut anarchy of images. *Odin's Shield Maiden*, despite its shorter format, takes this approach one step further by stripping down the narrative even more and summoning up the vagueness and ether of Maddin's early masterpiece, *Archangel* (1990). What began as an inventive response to the constraints of movie-making in Winnipeg has developed into the refined work of a master.

## **DECO DAWSON**

One of the most ambitious commissions comes from Deco Dawson with his *The Last Moment*. A tireless, determined, reclusive, autodidactic virtuoso who was once described as the "heart throb of experimental cinema," Deco Dawson has accomplished truly astounding cinematic feats, and he's only 21 years old! Blessed with an unusually well-focussed set of kino eyes Dawson's early work revelled in the degraded narrative forms of the Winnipeg Film Group. With his Beckettian-titled series of *FILMs*, Dawson pioneered new realms of Winnipeg image degradation using an optical printer, bargain-basement Super-8 film, and by obeying Dziga Vertov's strict film commandments. These early stylistic tropes reached their climax with *FILM(dzama)* (2001), Dawson's best-known and most-celebrated film to date.

Since then Dawson's work has radically changed gears. The full-colour, Vertov-defying *plan-séquence* of his music video, *Dumb Angel* (2005) as well as the vaguely necrophiliac porn of his found-footage video collage *Elizabeth Short* (2006) represent a radical departure from his early aesthetic. With *The Last Moment* Dawson abandons the degraded imagery of his *FILMs*, but nonetheless returns to his interest in the artifice of cinematic forms.

Dawson must be most appropriately considered a formalist, and *The Last Moment* is no exception. Dawson sends his characters through near-flawless reconstructions of five very different formal worlds of cinema. Each pastiche is impressive on its own, but what makes the film truly remarkable is the mysterious narrative that emerges out from these surreal tectonic shifts between formalist realms. *The Last Moment* positions cinema at the very centre of our narrative consciousness, such that the familiar forms of film convention become the prism through which we understand our world and what's happening to us. In *The Last Moment*, it is the hegemonic artifices of cinema, not our own free will, which dictate both the truth and falsehood of every moment we can remember or imagine.

## MATT HOLM

Winter is the central image around which Winnipeg mythology is arranged, yet only a very tiny number of filmmakers have been brave enough to tap its cinematic potential. Conventional wisdom dictates that winter poses too great a challenge to the filmmaker. But Matt Holm has made two winter movies, making him the unrivalled Ernest Shackleton of the Winnipeg Film Group.

His acclaimed first comedy, *The Lost Bundefjord Expedition* (2000), follows the absurd survivalist exploits of three adventurers as they freeze to death on Lake Winnipeg. *Bundefjord* is an integral part of a curious lineage of Film Group movies (including Maddin's *Gimli* films, Michael Utgaard's *Egil's Saga*, and, for the consistency of his fish fetish alone, Mike Maryniuk's *Spawn of Pickerel Ron* and *Fish Arms*) which obsess over the Nordic strangeness of Manitoba's Interlake: its fish, its crazed isolation and the odd customs of its Scandinavian inhabitants. In Holm's follow-up short, *Spring Chickens* (2002) – a hilarious work of very stylized silliness about an octogenarian baseball player (which includes a cameo by Peter Paul Van Camp, the star of the Film Group's very first production, *Rabbit Pie*) – we see once more Holm's unique comic eye for the hilarity of doom.

With *Man of the Northwest*, Holm returns to the winter adventure. *Man of the Northwest* is the most self-consciously regional of all the commissioned films. Reflecting a tendency of Winnipeg filmmaking that *Cinema Canada* once termed "Prairie Postmodernism," *Man of the Northwest* is an ironic reworking of oddball American depictions of Canada, laced with the pop-culture kitsch of Dudley Do-Right, the clownish machismo of Robert Goulet and the gonzo Canadiana to be found in early Hollywood adventure romances like *Nomads of the North* (1920) and *The 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (1942). In this respect, *Man of the Northwest* recalls the work of Film Group pioneer, role model to Guy Maddin and hitherto unsung master of Canadian cinema, John Paizs. As Holm's bearded fetish actor, Michael Olito, begins sawing on his fiddle with a frozen beaver, we see the absurdist lengths to which Holm takes his disparate influences.

## CAROLE O'BRIEN

The Winnipeg Film Group has a reputation for being the machismo reserve of angry fanboys, but it also has a unique tradition of feminine films as well. To filmmaker Carole O'Brien, these films are engendered by their introspection, emotionality and their concern for themes of identity and memory. O'Brien is an obvious pioneer within this tradition – along with Cecilia Araneda's (*Memory, Amnesia*) and Matthew Etches – (*dialogue*) and her commission film, *...Time Away* is a unique work in the WFG's feminine tradition through its use of found footage.

The images in *...Time Away* were originally filmed by an unidentified priest as he travelled across the earth in the 1960s and 70s. Several years ago (no one can remember exactly when) the priest's family came into the Film Group to donate a box of his 16mm reels. The priest had recently died, but no one thought to ask his name, nor even the name of his family. Indeed, the amnesia was so thick that day that no one can even recollect who it was that accepted the donation on behalf of the Film Group. In a way, the whole scenario has the innate feel of a Carole O'Brien film. For O'Brien's body of work --- from *The Piano Lesson* (1995) to *En trois temps* (2003) --- has been so compelled by themes of memory, identity and cultural displacement. It is no wonder that O'Brien would be fascinated by this footage, for it raises questions that O'Brien films like to ask of us: Who are you? Where do you come from? Where are you going?

Found Footage filmmaking is a transformative rather than generative art. The masters of found footage – such as Arthur Lipsett and Craig Baldwin – have managed to implant radically new, sometimes deeply personal, meanings and contexts into the images they find. Such is O'Brien's achievement with *...Time Away*; from these totally decontextualized images, O'Brien has built something singular and new. The pattern that fascinated O'Brien in the priest's footage was all the driving. Where other filmmakers might have seen a road safety movie, O'Brien sees an emotional ride, as much an escape as a move forward. *...Time Away* looks and feels like one elongated cinematic ellipse, of the kind used in narrative films to bridge one temporal space to another. While these moments are short, ephemeral transitions in most films, O'Brien has made the ellipse the central expressive passage upon which she drives us through feelings of disconnect, exile and solitude.

## NEIL McINNES

Manitoba is also distinguished for its singular animation tradition, and, along with Richard Condie, Brad Caslor and Ken Perkins, Neil McInnes is one of Winnipeg's earliest animation pioneers. McInnes was part of a small group of filmmakers in the 1970s who dreamt up the very idea of having an independent film co-op, and the fruits of their labours would be the Winnipeg Film Group. With films such as *Boarding House* and the acclaimed *Love Hound*

along with innumerable *Sesame Street* spots to his credit, Neil McInnes must be considered a pioneer of Winnipeg cinema.

In an age in which audiences have been trained to expect computer-generated CGI animation, Neil McInnes has had the vision and the bravery to go back to the land and create a 100% stop-motion tour-de-force. In a way, McInnes is bridging both the past and future of cinema in this movie about the filmmaking process. While his figures were animated the old-fashioned way, *Automoto* was shot frame-by-frame with a digital stills camera and the images you see are comprised of 24 jpegs per second.

*Automoto* is also a beautiful monument to human creativity. McInnes built virtually all of the characters and machines in *Automoto* out of found objects that he unearthed in his late father's garage. It is extraordinary to imagine McInnes in the middle of a chaotic junk heap of disassembled mechanical elements and seeing every body part he needed to build his robot. Such is the eye of a truly remarkable visual talent, of which there is no better testimony than the stunningly original universe McInnes has created in *Automoto*.

#### **THE FUTURE OF THE WINNIPEG IMAGE**

The Winnipeg image is key because it allows us to survive. Without the Winnipeg Film Group, and without images like the ones in this collection, there would be no image of Winnipeg. There would just be a stripped husk of image where a living organism once breathed. Our image would be processed into the kind seen in the many off shore, direct-to-video M.O.W.s that now shoot in Manitoba, where Winnipeg's streets and Burger Kings are passed off for Dallas, Kansas City or Anywhere. These new images that the Winnipeg Film Group has been generating for some 33 years must continue to challenge the processed order of our day and the work of these five filmmakers is a fitting tribute to that legacy and that future.