

SEARCHING LANDSCAPES

Manitoba Narrative Shorts

curated by Kevin Nikkel

Curatorial essay accompanying the Searching Landscapes program in the Open Vault: Independent Film Week series at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque, November 27 – 30, 2008

It was not an easy task to select dramatic films out of the many shorts that have emerged from Manitoba over the years, most of which have found a home through Dave Barber's expert and generous programming. Though filmmakers in Winnipeg have been making shorts before the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque began operating, few filmmakers emerging from this prairie city would disagree that the Cinematheque makes the struggle to take up the craft of filmmaking easier.

The six short films I have selected for this anniversary program are films I have enjoyed over the years that I think are worth watching together. I think these films each have an individual charm, but together they say something collectively about the intersection of our Cinematheque, of our city, and of the art of dramatic films. The shorts I've selected seem comfortable in a conversation on place, identity and a main element of dramatic films, the struggle.

The context for all this is the Canadian prairie, and more specifically, the fly-over city of Winnipeg. It would seem an unlikely place for such prolific and creative cinema to emerge. Our relentless climate and remote location compared to other urban centres contributes to the content we produce. One aspect of Winnipeg reflected in the films made by people from here is the struggle and restlessness of being from here. Stay for one winter in Winnipeg and you know. Bevan Klassen's film *Wildlands* is a great modern telling of the frontier adventure story. A frustrated father abandons life in Winnipeg to take his family out to search the remote wilderness of Manitoba to start life again, free of all the problems of modern urban living. The idealism of the father meets with the harshness of the elements, forcing him to compromise and return home humbled to life back in Winnipeg. The film plays as a postmodern lament and longing for something else; maybe that something else is not possible.

Allan Kroeker extends this theme of the search for land in his adaptation of Tolstoy's short parable *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* A businessman tries to take advantage of an opportunity to acquire land at a cheap price, as much as he can survey before sundown. The film shows off the prairie & Interlake landscape as the man tries to greedily take more and more land.

A lighter take on this odd quest for place is Howard Curle and John Kozak's short film *Two Men in Search of a Plot?* In this dark comedy, the search for land is focused; where can our protagonists find a place to bury a dead body.

Things get more complicated as the story unfolds, and the main characters begin to need more and more land for more and more bodies. This short is a fine example of the classic craft of comedic timing.

There have been many changes in the landscape of cinema venues over the years, demanding Cinematheque to evolve to meet these changes. I am grateful that the Cinematheque has survived, and thrived over the years. The Cinematheque was essential in my development as a filmmaker and as a film enthusiast. The screening of foreign, classic and independent films gave me exposure to films and filmmakers that shaped my identity, contributing to my development as a filmmaker. It contributed to the realization that I can do this, and that I need to make films. Where would I be without Cinematheque?

Where would I be without my pet pig? This is the question posed by Gary Yates's offbeat comedy short *Without Rockets*. What sort of life is there for the custodian of a rocket base in the rugged and isolated north is shutdown. As the title suggests, the main character is left to figure out how to cope with budget cutbacks (a regrettable circumstance that more and more artists and arts organizations seem to be facing recently with the current political climate, and government decisions to slash funding to essential arts programs). What sort of life and identity is left for him after he loses his best friend, and pet, Booster? The strength of Yates's early short film certainly paved the way for his later feature films.

Identity is also explored by Carole O'Brien in the emotional restlessness of her protagonist in *Motus Maestro*. The main character is a young composer struggling to make great music. He takes drastic action to silence the overwhelming pressures and distracting sounds of life around him. O'Brien's film is a great example of Manitoba cinematic storytelling; her short illustrates the exciting potential of the medium through striking visuals and a powerful soundtrack.

The anniversary of the Cinematheque and this program is a tribute to the way in which Dave Barber, and the staff of the Winnipeg Film Group and Cinematheque have overcome the many difficulties over the years to allow it to survive. These short films are examples of good dramatic character based storytelling; that of characters struggling to overcome obstacles. The main characters of *Without Rockets* and *Wildlands* are facing the elements. In *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* and *Motus Maestro* the struggle is an internal conflict. In Guy Maddin's film *The Heart of the World* the struggle is epic. The frantically paced short is the human struggle compressed into a classic romantic conflict and expanded to encompass a struggle to save the planet. Maddin's female protagonist sacrifices herself to save the world. What better way to celebrate Manitoba cinema and the legacy of our Cinematheque than through Guy Maddin's eclectic masterwork that brings us back to the early days of cinema.

The Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque has made it 25 years, an achievement worth celebrating. Here is hoping filmmakers and film enthusiasts have 25 more years to enjoy great movies at the Cinematheque. Maybe it offers us more than just a place to go on cold winter nights; perhaps it helps us understand this place called Winnipeg on the Canadian prairie. If the tradition continues, filmmakers will emerge from the Cinematheque inspired to continue creating great dramatic films.

- How Much Land Does a Man Need? *by Allan Kroeker* | 1978 | 10:00
- Two Men in Search of a Plot *by Howard Curle & John Kozak* | 1985 | 6:00
- Motus Maestro *by Carole O'Brien* | 1996 | 18:00
- Without Rockets *by Gary Yates* | 1994 | 12:00
- Wildlands *by Bevan Klassen* | 2003 | 12:00
- The Heart of the World *by Guy Maddin* | 2000 | 6:00

Kevin Nikkel is a filmmaker from Winnipeg. His films include narrative drama, animation and documentary. He juggles his time between filmmaking, parenting, and teaching part time.