

ILLUSION OF NORMALCY

Part of a Six-Set Historical DVD Collection from the Winnipeg Film Group

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Films selected by Guy Maddin

“Winnipeg,” my Montreal-based DOP sneered, “a nation of K-Mart dressers.” He had a point. Take a walk around the malls, drive around the neighbourhoods, and tell me what you see. Everyone looks so... so... normal.

It’s easy to be invisible here. Hiding behind your gas barbeque on your freshly made pine deck, quietly eating your kielbasa and cubed cheese at a wedding social. Easy as well to hide behind your camera, just letting it gently roll as everyone acts so normal in front of you. So normal. Nice folks, really. But then, something happens, something you weren’t expecting as you carefully threaded the magazine with film. Every now and then you get a glimpse beyond this white room of normalcy, and you see something furtive, creepy, bizarre. And then it vanishes, and you are left feeling slightly – what? Embarrassed? Disconcerted? Asking the people next to you, did you just see what I just saw?

You aren’t expecting this: this is boring old Winterpig, the place nobody wants to visit. And yet, the normalcy all around you is itself an oddity. It alone should alert you to be careful with your snap judgments and perhaps, to look a little closer. Actually, It’s the conviction that “nothing is happening here” that is the real illusion: that thought is like a pane of double sided glass that won’t reveal anything until you stand really, really, close to it, cup your hands around your eyes, and look steadily into the darkness; sometimes what you see is merely your reflection, but then sometimes, what you see suddenly becomes a whole other room. Trying to catch glimpses of that other room is a bit addictive. The urge to try and nail down what you saw is what makes filmmaking in Winnipeg so much fun.

What I have always found surprising is that this—pressing up against the double-paned glass of the apparently everyday normal—isn’t what filmmakers in other cities are doing. This is a Winnipeg thing. So, normal.

When I set out to make *Dog Stories*, I kept saying one thing: just tell me a story about a dog. I wanted sad stories, happy stories, heart-warming stories. I ran an ad in the pet column of the local paper: call this number with your dog story. I got surprisingly few lunatics calling, and lots of nice, earnest people, full of stories about their wonderful pet dogs. So, I really wasn’t expecting much. The day we shot Sonny the lucky poodle was the day the crew started to think the drugs were starting to kick in. I kept saying, how can just asking people to tell me a story about a dog get so emotionally complicated?

Around this time I met Russ Dyck. I always remember trying to talk to him about this film he wanted to make, *Joe 90*. He wasn't making a lot of sense. He kept saying that the lead character would always be adjusting his neck, and it would make the sound of a hockey puck sliding in a shoebox. Sssssshhhhhh-thud. He would add something about a car. And a bar in the middle of a gold and blue nowhere. And maybe some pixilation. Lots of sound effects. It was as if every odd thing he had ever heard, walking around on the family acreage, was about to come home to roost in this film. I wasn't expecting it to look so good, or that Joe would be this oddly compelling character, and his strange ramblings somehow familiar. I still walk into remote country diners expecting to see Joe, inert in a naugahyde booth, and as I eat my grilled from frozen fries, I hear the sssssshhhhhh-thud of his neck adjusting.

When John Kozak made *Dory*, I remember the crew talking about it. It sounded easy enough to shoot, they were out in the middle of nowhere, in a blacked out house, during a heat wave. Everybody talked about the heat, nobody mentioned a thing about the murder. But its effects could be felt: John tells this lurid story from the shoot, on the night of a 3 a.m. drive back to town, the van headlights slicing through the two edges of darkness. As they drove, they ran into a flock of night-maddened birds, hundreds of frantically flapping small dark bodies in a grainy cloud crashing into the van – we must have killed hundreds, said John, we didn't know what was happening, or what to do. Experiencing this slaughter of innocents was a little too realistically grisly to be called a metaphor for the gothically deranged *Dory*. Maybe it is better to say it was a little bit of the abyss looking back.

The always iconoclastic Ed Ackerman called it his typewriter film, an animation called *Primiti Too Taa*. Simple, really, just words, typed on a page. I worked as a projectionist at the Cinematheque at the time, and I saw the film repeatedly. It seems to have lodged into some primiti part of my brain, and sometimes, with pre-conscious clarity, I realize my whole world really is spiraling into a single "bo." And at that point I also find that the only answer for nnz kkr muu? is pggiv mu.

We were so normal, shooting those films, and we still are. And we are still out there. As you read this we will still be carefully threading film into our cameras, in search of that other room, outside this illusion of normalcy. Sometimes we get something, sometimes we don't. Sometimes when you look into that dark room, the room looks back. Good thing there is glass between us... or is there? John and I had a running bet for many years about which member of the WFG was going to climb to the top of the Artspace building and start taking potshots. Sometimes we put the money on ourselves. Filmmaking is like that.

Juu – Kaaaaaa?