

THE WFG'S FIRST DECADE IN A NEW CENTURY
Part of a Six-Set Historical DVD Collection from the Winnipeg Film Group
by Cecilia Araneda

A film producer stopped me on the street in 2010 and told me he was interested in making a documentary on the Winnipeg Film Group – he wondered what I thought of the idea. Ambitious, I told him, because for every filmmaker in the city, there is a different Film Group, and each of these versions of reality is true, even if they are in direct opposition to other versions. The Winnipeg Film Group is an enigmatic entity that is very hard to define because it is not one absolute thing, but rather a compendium of individual experiences and sometimes very fleeting relationships. In the absence of one absolute true history existing, the best a documentary could hope to do is to tackle the roots of its immense and evolving mythology.

In 2003, when Danishka Esterhazy, Solomon Nagler and I were asked by the Film Group to curate the final in a six-set DVD collection contextualizing the filmmaking history for the Group, it was a very different time. The near ten year wait in producing this DVD enabled us to move our time span to cover a full decade – of singular importance to the WFG because this first decade in the new century saw an unprecedented level of diversification in filmmaking in Winnipeg. For the first time, Norma Bailey, Elise Swerhone, Shereen Jerrett, Carole O'Brien and Paula Kelly were no longer the exceptions in Winnipeg; prior to the 2000s, rarely did women as directors have doors open as easily as they had for men. And, of course, the latter half of this first decade of the century saw the emergence and rise of Aboriginal filmmakers in Winnipeg, where possibly a total void had existed before.

And yet, in as much as these two changes alone in the 2000s are each of singular importance unto themselves, these were not the only changes that occurred. This first decade in the new century also harkened in an era of *do-it-yourself* filmmaking to Winnipeg that is book-ended at both the beginning and the end of the decade by big productions and the prominence of feature films – though the recent resurgence of feature film has been a direction dominated by women and facilitated by the increasing quality and decreasing expense of digital technologies. What happened in the decade that immediately followed Y2K was a then new generation of filmmakers following more individual, personal and introspective approaches to film facilitated by access to new (or, in some cases, new to us) technologies, creating a new aesthetic to Winnipeg filmmaking that continued to resist the more realist approaches undertaken by those working elsewhere in Canadian cinema.

When the decade turned, filmmakers Matthew Holm, Patrick Lowe, Deco Dawson and Sean Garrity crossed over in time with a generation filmmakers that had come just before. We were emerging from a period of large, beautiful, and often transgressive works and into a new era of *do-it-yourself* opened up by Solomon Nagler in 2001, after attending Phil Hoffman's fabled Film Farm in southern Ontario. The filmmaking environment in Winnipeg at the time was fertile ground waiting to be seeded with opportunity, and so when Nagler introduced hand-processing and hand-crafted filmmaking approaches with technical guru John Kapitany and then WFG Training Coordinator Jeffrey Erbach, a new generation within the filmmaking community lined up. In that very first edition of the \$225 Film Experiment, students included Deco Dawson, Mike Maryniuk, Danishka Esterhazy and myself, and in the next years, Sean Garrity and Heidi Phillips would follow. And with the Film Farm approaches in hand, a broad base of filmmakers in Winnipeg suddenly were armed with a new philosophy that it was wholly possible to complete new works without major budgets. Though some filmmakers experimented with hand crafted filmmaking techniques only for a short time, the legacy of the shift in state of mind remained as the major change in the decade, as a mind-set that would continue on in the advent of a mass migration to digital forms.

Working in a parallel manner, Aboriginal filmmakers Kevin Lee Burton, Darryl Nepinak and Caroline Monnet also emerged in this decade with a similar *do-it-yourself* mindset, where small works could be just as significant as major ones. While Nepinak and Monnet developed as filmmakers as a result of the resources offered by the Winnipeg Film Group, Burton developed through a different route. Born in God's Lake Narrows in northern Manitoba, Burton voyaged not to Winnipeg, but instead to Vancouver to start his filmmaking career, and would become the first major Aboriginal filmmaker to emerge from Manitoba. By the time he returned to Manitoba and settled in Winnipeg in the late 2000s, his work had already been shown at Sundance and been selected for the prestigious TIFF Top Ten. His return to Manitoba coincided with Caroline Monnet's emergence as a filmmaker, and his influence on her work as her editor and producer is clear as their collective body of work since considers the Aboriginal experience in an urban environment and the impact of the loss of language to cultural identity.

Like Kevin Lee Burton, Sean Garrity and Matthew Rankin developed their careers as filmmakers away from Manitoba. Garrity studied filmmaking in both Toronto and Argentina before returning to Winnipeg in the late 1990s. Matthew Rankin, similarly, left for Montreal to formally pursue a filmmaking education after having produced a now largely unknown body of work while a teenager in the 1990s supported through the Winnipeg Film Group. While Rankin is clearly one of the most important filmmakers from Winnipeg to have emerged in the 2000s, he has done so while largely away from Winnipeg, while principally residing in Montreal and elsewhere around the world.

The films selected for this DVD reflect the spirit of *emerging*, and consciously include earlier works in the careers of filmmakers who evolved within the first decade of this new century. When we were collectively asked as a group to curate this six-set collection – Patrick Lowe, Guy Maddin, John Kozak, Jeffrey Erbach, Carole O’Brien and our group of three – it was clear that part of the difficulty in this curatorial process was that the selected themes were open to a range of interpretations, compounded by the existence of so many filmmakers and works from which to select. And, with the instructions that each of the curators should have at least one work reflected in the entire collection, we have included the work of Patrick Lowe in our DVD, and at the same time requested that Carole O’Brien not include work of Danishka Esterhazy or myself in her DVD on the women filmmakers of the Film Group who emerged prior to 2004. This collective curatorial process has been far from an exact science, however hopefully has reflected at least the essential spirit of the filmmaking community that has emerged in Winnipeg in nearly four decades – a compendium of individual works that have contributed to a collective and evolving whole.