

SENSATIONALISTS OF THE 90'S

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

by Jeffrey Erbach

There was a pocket of time, not so long ago, when members of a small artistic collective, working under the crushing weight of some towering filmmaking giants, managed to peer out from the smothering blanket of obscurity and bend a new fork in the group's already impressive history. Working out of the land island of Winnipeg, filmmakers who saw nothing outward instead looked inward, channelling their sense of loneliness and other-ness into personal, expressionistic work deemed successful if only for its artistic viability. With a sneer to the mini television pieces created by industry wanna-bees, these filmmakers, with one eye clearly fixated on the talents of previous members, put the other eye to exposing themselves and their neighbours through the use of abstract metaphor and an unflinching lens.

A grouping of films, the result of having simmered over the low flame of gut eating imagery from Guy Maddin's superb *The Dead Father*, warped social, familial, and sexual politics in a unifying manner. What would later become evident was that it was rare to see filmmakers act simultaneously, as if by force of communal unconsciousness, to create parallel nowhere worlds populated with the heavy, disturbingly blunt feeling of dread and isolation then so common in Winnipeg films. The trio, *Rapture*, *Brothers*, and my own *Soft Like Me*, could be taken as a treatise on the way environment informs family, sexual longing and childhood development. These three expertly crafted films remain beautiful, mouldy artefacts of the silent, pervasive psychosis which continues to fester in the filmmakers of this city.

Just on shore, and outside the causeway of these purposefully skewed dramas, the hammer of perspective worked hard on the soft clay of history in Noam Gonick's *1919*. A historical document which revisits the 1919 Winnipeg general labour strike, the piece is entirely accurate save for the revisionist, raunchy melodrama centered at one of the many bath houses then common in the commercial Exchange District. Part faded memory, part queer empowerment, and altogether ravishing, the film should be required viewing for straight kids bent on knowing how the famous strike could have, should have, or might have went down.

While these filmmakers chipped at the surface of Winnipeg's hardened, interior secrets, another filmmaker, having been on a sabbatical of alternate fits, starts, and works of genius, returned to the murky, blackened studio of the Film Group. The result, commissioned by the BBC, was an ode to artist Odilon Redon, and is vintage Guy Maddin. Weaving together early Soviet Constructivism with the puberty pains of the early talkies, the piece acts as an impressionistic expression, a dense visual smorg wrapping a fractured narrative like the newspaper of some British fish and chips. With more to say in four minutes than most films do in an hour, the

visual assault, while staggering, is tempered by a charisma so captivating that it's not uncommon to catch Winnipeggers passing out in the streets for having simply thought of the film.

Skipping lightly over the boys' brooding theatricalities, renaissance women Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan punctured straight male fears and celebrated female sexuality in what may be, due to sheer lack of self consciousness, the most bizarre film ever set upon audiences of any orientation. *We're Talking Vulva*, a genre, mind, sex bender and pseudo sexual education music video, intelligently uses a giant, 'Rap'ping rubber vagina to deftly address issues like female masturbation, while simultaneously dismantling the sexually charged aura surrounding female genitalia. Her flip up sunglasses are a decidedly nice touch, leading one to wonder just how dark it is 'down there'.

Left off this probing super sexual highway which swept up many of the Film Group members in the nineties, Barry Gibson's *Question of Reality* documented the real or imagined psychic abilities of a loner, and in the process, put a touchingly human face on the heavily metaphoric isolation commonly used by other members. Working on a scale minimalists would call extravagant, this frank, even calculating documentary is also deceptively mature, situating notions of reality, meaning, and truth against both the subject of the film, and the very act of filming it.

On the national stage, Winnipeg Film Group members comprise only a small selection of filmmaking talent. It's almost infinitesimal when put into an international arena. However, there have, and continue to be, nagging questions about the weather, the funding and the water in Winnipeg given the deep vision and thorough consistency of the films made here. Of course, there are no easy answers, but if the period of the mid to late nineties made anything clear it was this - when you live over 600 kilometres away from the nearest decent sized city, you're bound to expose a little something of yourself.