

The Highlights - Guy Maddin's Winnipeg

Guy Maddin's latest movie, *My Winnipeg*, is hazy and so full of snow that I was left wondering what freezing to death really feels like. I get the impression that it might be comfortable, and I'd have plenty of time to either reminisce or forget everything. It also reminds me that one of the things I really like about fiction is its ability to get at the truth without worrying too much about the facts. It's not exactly lying. It's just blurring the details in order to be honest about an idea. Sometimes what gets told sticks a little bit better. This is what I think Guy Maddin is going for with this movie. He calls it a "docu-fantasia," and it is consumed with memory. It is unabashedly Freudian and brimming with nostalgia.



Still from Guy Maddin, *My Winnipeg*

The movie opens with Guy Maddin proclaiming that after 'many botched attempts' he must leave Winnipeg, the city of his birth. His stand-in self, played by Darcy Fehr, boards a lumbering train and joins the other sleepy passengers as they move toward the edge of town. Maddin narrates, repeatedly commanding his stand-in to stay awake. To get away he has to be alert, has to understand what has kept him there so long. He must untangle himself, and in order to do that Maddin decides to film his way out, to re-create pivotal childhood moments and scrutinize the city's history. Viewing the end result is like being present during an intense session of psychoanalysis-the kind where breakthroughs take place. Maddin's personal anecdotes intertwine seamlessly with historical footage, thanks to the fact that the movie is primarily filmed in black and white. The movie is also full of stark lighting and soft focus that turns everything into a dreamy flashback and gives it personal significance. This makes Maddin the ultimate unreliable narrator. He is both the author and the subject. Every fact is filtered through his memory, and I don't necessarily believe everything he tells me, even though I really want to.

The most binding memories are those involving Maddin's mother. When introducing her he states that she is 'as perennial as the winter, as ancient as the bison, magnetic pull, a direction from which I can't turn for long.' He relates her body to the geography of the region and cast femme fatale Anne Savage to play her. He then sublets his childhood home and places her back in the living room. The re-created family (Maddin hired actors to play all of his sibling and borrowed his girlfriend's dog to replace the long dead family pet) gathers to watch *Ledge Man*, a program that featured Maddin's mother. In each episode a middle-aged man steps out onto a ledge only to be talked back in by his mother. It is hard to believe this program was ever on air, but its symbolism is beautiful. A man decides that life isn't worth living, but his mind is changed when his mother references an instance in which he made her proud. In this case it was being featured as child model in a local catalogue. There was no mention of adult accomplishment, and it is hard to believe that could calm someone in crisis, but I suppose sometimes it is the little things that count.



Still from Guy Maddin, *My Winnipeg*

In one of the more curiously unnerving reenactments Maddin's sister, played by Amy Stewart, runs in to tell her mother that she has had an accident. She hit and killed a deer on her way home from the track-team party. The mother inspects the damage. The dented car is covered in fur and blood. She quickly ascertains what actually happened, what the carnage means. The mother links the violence, adrenaline, and death to sex. She asks her daughter where the 'real party took place,' if it was 'the boy on the track team or the man with the tire iron.' It turns out that it was the man with the tire iron, the one who stopped to kill off the

deer, who finished off the distraught daughter. The mother asks, 'did he pin you down or did you just lie back and let nature take its course?' Everything about that reenactment is disconcerting. There is mother's almost psychic knowledge of what took place and her accusatory tone. There is the language surrounding the young girl's sexuality and the eroticization of violence. Maddin's sister was turned into prey. She was faulted for being in the woods, at a party where the boys could outrun her. She is physically linked to the deer, and her desire is vilified. This is, of course, all filtered through Maddin's memory, and it leaves me wondering what it means to try and re-create events that one did not initially understand. How much of that scene is iconic personal memory, and how much of it pertains to larger and more adult opinions about sexuality?

Maddin does take a much lighter tone when talking about sex and the general Winnipeg population. These are some of the few moments that hint at an ironic distance. Deep winter is referred to glibly as 'the bareback months' that lead to predictable population surges. That tone is maintained when he once again links sex with the death of animals. A squirrel electrocuted by power lines is responsible for lighting the horseracing track on fire. In a beautifully animated sequence, shadow-like horses flee to the river. As they attempt to swim to safety, they are trapped by ice floes and die. Their heads are left sticking out of the ice, and adventuresome Winnipeggers venture out onto the frozen river to have a look. Maddin switches back to live-action footage and shows the dead horses with their neck painfully twisted and their eyes wide with terror. The couples are holding hands and giggling; the image is strange. It is darkly comic, bewitching, and sad. According to Maddin the wintry picnics held at the horses' graves led to an unprecedented population boom that fall.

Maddin's "docu-fantasia" is full of scenes that I don't quite believe, but would rather not fact-check. I already know I prefer Maddin's memories and his invention to the reality of the city. The moments when the film switches to color in order to show contemporary images of the city are jarring and they function as social commentary. Watching those scenes is like being woken abruptly only to be disappointed. The city decides to demolish the original Winnipeg Hockey Arena after letting it fall into disrepair. The Paddle Wheel Night Club, which once hosted "man pageants" and illicit gambling, becomes another restaurant with fluorescent lighting. The version of Winnipeg that differs from Maddin's dreamy vision seems tragic and empty. It is much nicer to think about the mystic forces that are caused by the intersection of the city's two rivers and its location at the center of the continent. It seems better that there be streets that aren't on the map and are quietly navigated by gypsy cabs. It is perfect that those rogue streets run parallel to the legitimate streets. I genuinely hope they are always covered in snow.