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Professor Kim Olynyk

ENGLISH: Literary Topics 1310

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“Mother I Hardly Knew Ye”: The haunting of Guy Maddin as evidenced through his  
film *My Winnipeg*.

In Guy Maddin’s film *My Winnipeg* the writer / director examines his ties to the city of his birth through the use of his craft, filmmaking. Maddin explores a wealth of natural introspective topics, from sibling/child -parent interaction, to Oedipal tinges, and the sudden loss of a major male role model in this unconventional yet astute genre of what he describes as the docu-myth. In this paper, I will show how Maddin utilizes the haunting of what could be described as ghosts, to examine the natural turmoil we experience as we evolve and mature. I will show his transition from the security and safety of what is known to that which is unknown, exorcising all the ties that bind him to his comfortable pew in Winnipeg’s quirky church. I will use two scenes from the film to illustrate Maddin’s exorcising. The first is the opening scene as he and his fellow travelers/ sleepwalkers attempt to leave Winnipeg by rail and the second the death of his father coupled with the destruction of the Winnipeg Arena.

Maddin opens the film with “All aboard!”(9) a familiar term to the rail riding North Americans of his generation. This is a particularly poignant phrase for a film on Winnipeg given the city’s rich rail history and significance the railroad had

on the establishment of Winnipeg and Western Canada in general. The scene offers a metaphor for our transition from adolescences to adulthood. Using black and white over colour film, Maddin sets a dreamlike atmosphere to the scene, and further enhances the nostalgic essence by incorporating a “damaged film” technique to suggest we are viewing archival film rather than recent footage. We are introduced to Maddin’s nemesis for this film, his burning desire to leave and venture out on his own and the ties that bind him to the city of his birth. He offers evidence to his turmoil with this narrative “But how to escape one’s city? How to wake oneself enough for the frightening task?” And how to find one’s way out?” (9). This is Maddin’s first awakening from the safe confines of his family and neighbourhood. The imagery is rich with the Ukrainian sausage on the table, the Free Press toque on the head of a fellow traveler/ escapee. They signify the cultural diversity of the city and a nod to the defunct youthful vocation of the paperboy (now a union job held by pensioners augmenting their income). These are symbols of the ghosts Maddin so desperately wishes to escape, his culture / city and his youth. Most of us experience this moment of tingling terror as we cross the threshold from adolescence to adulthood, it is what some call our heritage and others our ghosts that either spur us on to make that transition or hold us back, stunting our growth and tying us to tradition and ancient creeds. Maddin masterfully illustrates this with the ghostly image of his mother who appears in the window of the train and his narrative “The

wooly, furry, frosty, lap." "The Forks!" "The animals, hunters, boatway, train and Mother." "These are the reasons we're here." "These are the reasons we've stayed." "These are the reasons I'm leaving." (15). Maddin has set the premise for his journey and unveiled the first and perhaps the major specter that thwarts his escape from home and heritage as well as his transition from youth to adulthood.

Males, on the whole, are a product of influence. We either emulate the examples we are given or conversely, we rebel against tradition and form our own unique sense of self. For those from the more traditional sectors of Canadian 1950's society, the male role model was most often the father of the family unit. In that Maddin is a university educated film director it is fairly safe to assume he comes from this sector of Canadian society. He also hints to his social status with this narrative, "It was the biggest house in the neighbourhood, also the strangest." (21). Maddin offers keen insight to the psychological effects job loss has on men of middle age with this perceptive bit of narrative, "I'd like to say he spontaneously combusted right on the ice of the arena – that would have been great – but it was quieter than that." "He shrank into a puff of cigarette smoke, and was gone." (89). This is perhaps one of the best analogies of how the loss of self-identity and influence has such destructive effects on the male psyche of that (and arguably any) era. Coupled with the sense Maddin was at a formative age at the time, it is easy to imagine the tragedy he experienced at the loss of his major male influence and the haunting Maddin feels. Maddin's brilliantly effective cinematic vehicle of the superimposed image of

his middle-aged father on the rink surface of his beloved “Old Barn” and a jump-cut segue to the full image of his father’s emotionless face complete with one eye of his spectacles obliqued as was the prescription of the time for his father’s particular eye ailment is emotively effective at visually portraying his loss. Maddin then dissolves the haunting image of his broken father to wisps of smoke indicating the transition of his father from influence to specter.

Guy Maddin’s *My Winnipeg* is a rich cinematic introspection of his personal journey from the confines of his familial boundaries to the inception of his own journey to self-actualization. He uses the film to visually represent the natural shackles of history and heritage use to maintain the status quo of child / parent. It is the familial history and experiences that formulate our schema of world as we develop but until we can release these shackles we are haunted and in some respect retarded from personal growth. In the film Maddin exorcises these ghosts by confronting them head-on. Through this confrontation, and examination of their importance to his sense of self, Maddin is freed from the ties that bind him to place. It is by freeing himself that he is no longer compelled to leave. By confronting them he can place them into perspective with respect to his journey of self-actualization. Unencumbered, he can remain in the city of his birth and still develop his own sense of self.

Works Cited

Maddin, Guy *My Winnipeg* Script of the film with annotation Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009. Print

Maddin, Guy *My Winnipeg* DVD, Everyday Pictures / Buffalo Gal Pictures 2009. Film

Additional reference

William Strunk JR. & E.B.White *The Elements of Style*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon 1979. Print

