



# GUY MADDIN AND THE LANGUAGE OF EARLY CINEMA

Text by Cecilia Araneda

Guy Maddin is undoubtedly one of the most original voices in contemporary moving image art, not only in Canada, but also in the world. His body of work resonates in an unexpected way, using the tropes of early cinema as the mechanism behind his art practice.

As the language of cinema evolved in the 20th century, itself building on theatre and performing art traditions to explore the full potential of the then new media, it developed its own traditions increasingly referenced by newer generations. But, while referencing what has come before is a common practice in the arts, the approach used by Guy Maddin is stunningly unique in that he goes far beyond this approach; Maddin utilizes the existing language of early cinema as the essential *media* of his art. Early cinema—and in particular, old world cinema—is more than his artistic grammar; it is the elemental dictionary of words that forms the sentences and paragraphs of his artistic practice.

Guy Maddin has been working at his art for over twenty five years, creating an internationally critically acclaimed body of work while remaining strongly rooted in his home in Winnipeg, a small city with the population of 700,000 that is quite literally in

the middle of nowhere. Winnipeg is a key element in the evolution of his distinct practice; within this middle of nowhere, Maddin worked at building his films like art projects, inspired by John Paizs's ability to complete his own films here and have them receive attention and acclaim in spite of the many who thought this to be impossible.

Jeff Solylo, production designer for many of Maddin's early works, has described the working process as a group of art students making films while being completely oblivious to the established working protocols of filmmaking. In this middle of nowhere, well outside of the Canadian film establishment, Maddin was able to develop his own way of working that was in sharp contrast to the strong wave of realism being pursued by the legions of anonymous industrial filmmakers elsewhere in the world.

In the early 2000's, after having worked for more than 15 years and already having garnered significant national and international acclaim, Guy Maddin consciously adopted the editing techniques famously developed by the early Soviet filmmakers of the 1920's (most notably, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov). Beginning with the works *The Heart of the World* (2000) and *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002), these changes enabled Maddin to surge forward even more clearly than before. What adopting the formal Constructivist editing techniques of Eisenstein in particular afforded Maddin was a platform which could more strongly frame his already well developed preoccupation with old world cinema. In the ten years since, Maddin's output and recognition has increased exponentially.

While receiving increasing attention and acclaim for the contribution his unique artistic voice provides to contemporary cinema culture internationally, Maddin has at the same time quite consciously evolved into a multimedia and multiplatform artist.

Prior to the 2000's Maddin worked almost exclusively within a practice that resembled more closely traditional filmmaking, working in 16 mm and then 35 mm. In shifting media—first to Super 8 mm, and then to video formats—Maddin began an ongoing experimentation of the potential each media and presentation platform could provide him. Most of the works Maddin has completed within the past

decade have been completed with a hybrid of media, including small gauge film and digital elements. Increasingly, Maddin has been comfortable reducing and eliminating the real film elements of his works, even as he continues to use the canon of cinema as his essential artistic language. Maddin's most recent works—*Hauntings* and *Keyhole*—have in fact been shot entirely on DSLRs (the former on the T2i, and the latter on the 7D), without any film production components whatsoever.

It is within this past decade as well that Maddin has moved into multichannel forms, moving into installation and web exhibition platforms. In developing his career in this matter, he continues his ongoing working practice of remaining outside of the film establishment—this time, as a conscious decision and in a way that acknowledges that moving images are now no longer restricted to the holy shrine of the communal cinema space and endless permutations are possible in their construction and presentation.

*Towards Bend the Knee* (2003) was originally completed as a gallery installation work consisting of ten 6-minute chapters viewable only by a single viewer at a time. In its most recent presentation in Poland, the viewing stations were crafted as hybrid constructions of Soviet-era furniture (pianos in particular) and Times Square coin-op porn booths. Viewers, experiencing the projections in semi-privacy and within what Maddin describes as "lurid states of aroused discomfort," were partially visible from the chest down and through large keyholes built into the stations.

*Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair* (2009; co-directed with Isabella Rossellini), is a 7-minute loop intended to be presented in large-scale within the urban environment, projected onto a skyscraper wall. Originally screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in January 2009, the work was recently presented in New York City's Duffy Square on December 17, 2009, complete with a "live electrocution" of Rossellini.

*Hauntings* (2010), Maddin's most recently completed work, is an installation that conjures what Maddin describes as the "ghosts" of cinema, re-interpreting lost works of early cinema. The work was initially presented in Toronto as an installation of window

tableaux within a gallery environment and an outdoor screening projected onto the wall of a large building, with the final incarnation to be ultimately web-based.

Included within *Hauntings* are *The Brian Sinclair Story*, inspired by Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), and *Hubby Does the Washing*, inspired by the 1912 film by Alice Guy. With *Hauntings*, however, even though its *raison d'être* is firmly planted in an exploration of early cinema, hints of a new evolution in Maddin's approach as an artist start to reveal themselves, as demonstrated by the very noticeable departure to HD colour used in *Bing & Bela* (named for Bing Crosby and Bela Lugosi).

Interestingly, Maddin's easy adoption of new media tools and expanded presentation platforms has been unquestionably in the service of his exploration of the vocabulary of early cinema. Each new tool or method he adopts, he does so to facilitate further steps back into cinema's language—not only in the construction of his works, but also in their presentation, including his live scoring and narration techniques (used with *Brand Upon the Brain!*, *My Winnipeg* and the most recent incarnation of *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*), and his ongoing exploration of silent cinema—all of which are unheard of approaches in modern cinema.

### The Winnipeg Haunting

It is hard to imagine that in the places *Hauntings* has been presented before—in Toronto and in Berlin—that *The Brian Sinclair Story* could have been understood as anything other than a response to Michael Snow's famous *La Région Centrale*. In all his previous work Maddin quite possibly has never made reference to real-life quotidian struggles that are the preoccupation of many other artists; indeed, Maddin's work has been lauded for being firmly rooted in the fantastical and lurid. And for this reason, *The Brian Sinclair Story* stands out for being very unmaddinesque.

The real-life Brian Sinclair, an Aboriginal man, died in 2008 in a Winnipeg hospital after sitting for over 34 hours in a wheelchair in the waiting room after checking in but never being tended to. Sinclair, a double-amputee, had been sent to the hospital

from an inner city clinic with a letter that specified what care he required. Immediately following his death, there were initial denials that he had actually checked in upon his arrival at the hospital, however surveillance footage later revealed otherwise. The chief medical examiner eventually concluded that Sinclair could have been saved with simple catheter change and some antibiotics. To this day, his family still struggles to see the full truth of what happened to Sinclair in the hospital made public for a wider dialogue to occur within a city where a very strong undercurrent of racism exists towards Aboriginal peoples.

Waiting in a wheelchair, alone in an empty institutional room with white walls and a concrete floor, Maddin's Sinclair is framed by the distinctively-moving camera technique utilized by Snow in *La Région Centrale*, which sees it rotating freely along various axes of a ball-like tripod in slow-motion. This unique camera technique transforms an otherwise straight-forward image and takes it to heightened proportions; Sinclair appears to be asleep in the light-drenched room, yet for those of us who know he has already passed away, we understand that he is actually in limbo.

While it is true that often Maddin's films are viewed differently by Winnipeggers than by the rest of the world, given how much Maddin-asserted fact we know to be truly fiction, *The Brian Sinclair Story* Maddin ascribes a reverse effect, as in this film, what may be perceived as fiction, we know to actually be fact.

As a collection of films, *Hauntings* stands out within Guy Maddin's body of work because it reveals hints of possible new directions he is currently exploring as an artist. As any process of experimentation may inherently contain both unexpected starts and stops, it is possible that *The Brian Sinclair Story* may be an isolated foray into referencing present-day Winnipeg. Regardless of whether this ultimately ends up to be the case, this film is truly a Winnipeg haunting that merits our collective attention.

**Guy Maddin** is a Winnipeg-based filmmaker with ten features to his credit, including cult-classic *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988); and *Archangel* (1990), which won the U.S. National Film Critics Award for best experimental film of the year. Since then he has won many other awards including the Telluride Silver Medal for life achievement in 1995; an Emmy for his ballet movie *Dracula*—Pages from a Virgin's Diary; the San Francisco International Film Festival's prestigious *Persistence of Vision Award* in 2006, and others—and created dozens of beguiling films in his unique personal style. These include such celebrated feature works as *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003), *Brand upon the Brain!* (2006), and *My Winnipeg* (2007), winner of the TIFF City TV Prize for Best Canadian Feature. His latest feature, *Keyhole*, will premiere at TIFF in 2011. Maddin is also a writer and teacher, and occupies the position of Distinguished Filmmaker in Residence at the University of Manitoba.

Chilean-born, Winnipeg based filmmaker and curator **Cecilia Araneda** holds a B.F.A. (hons.) from York University and an M.F.A. from U.B.C. Araneda has completed nine short films as director and writer, which have won awards and screened internationally. In 2010, her work was the subject of a retrospective screening at the Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa. Araneda is a co-founder of WNDX and has curated a number of programs for this curatorial collective since its inception in 2005.

#### EXHIBITION

##### **Guy Maddin Hauntings 1**

2 September–2 October 2011

#### RECEPTION

7 PM, Friday, 2 September

#### SCREENING OF *OUR WINNIPEG*

By Sarah Febraro + Art City participants

7 PM, Friday, 16 September

#### ARTIST TALK WITH GUY MADDIN

3 PM, Saturday, 1 October

#### WNDX CLOSING PARTY

##### WITH ARTIST IN ATTENDANCE

11 PM, Saturday, 1 October (Nuit Blanche)

PLATFORM acknowledges the support of its volunteers, membership, board of directors, and staff. The Centre operates with funding from Manitoba Arts Council and Winnipeg Arts Council. Guy Maddin's *Hauntings I* is a co-production of PLATFORM + WNDX and was originally commissioned for the opening of TIFF Bell Light Box in 2010. Gratitude is due to acartinc., Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Video Pool Media Arts Centre, and Art City for in-kind support of this project. Cover photo by Steven Ackerman.



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