

The Nostalgic, the Poignant and the Macabre

My Winnipeg: The first docu-fantasia by Guy Maddin

A docu-fantasia, which serves to question the legitimacy of our memories, combines with an impressive retrospective on the world's coldest city.

Guy Maddin's first documentary, *My Winnipeg*, occupies ambivalent territory. It is an area between homage to family and native roots, while being a biting satire on the ties that bind us there. Maddin describes the 79-minute feature as a "docu-fantasia", whereby, "it's as much full of wishful thinking, desires and regrets as cold hard fact." The treatment and selections of Winnipeg legends certainly have fantastical elements to them, but Maddin insists that all of the film's tales and facts are true and realistic, "maybe I shouldn't have used that route word, fantasy, because that suggests maybe more made up stuff." This ambiguous position between the true-to-life and the fantastic, serves to further Maddin's observations on the nature of memory. Everything is true, as remembered by him and other residents and children of Winnipeg, but how much truth can we actually claim from our deep-seated memories?

As a love song to the town, which he has been trying to escape for 50 years, *My Winnipeg* transcends the usual rules of documentary by being "unapologetically subjective". Traditionally thought to be an impersonal, detached, genre, Maddin is quick to highlight the ulterior motives and interested parties behind the works of his contemporaries; "People like Michael Moore, are making docu-fantasias too. He knows exactly what he wants to say, I guess I'm just being more open about my subjectivity."

Famed for recreations of films from the early-sound 1930s era, Maddin was approached by the documentary channel for a snippet of Winnipeg propaganda, "they literally said 'enchant me with Winnipeg'. For me though, I'm enchanted by melancholy as much as euphoric things," and so the documentary became both praising and critical of this small Canadian city. Ultimately it presented Maddin with the opportunity for a more universal and

representative piece on innate connections with memory and home. Rather than being exclusively concerned with Winnipeg it "ends up being about everyone's home and everyone's rear-view gazing, and all the things that come in their wake."

Collated from the thoughts and fables of Winnipeg's residents, as well as Maddin's own recollections, *My Winnipeg* sees a number of unlikely events, from an imagined Nazi invasion, to an absurd baby boom following the unintentional massacre of the city's racing horses, all from a city that claims ten times the average number of sleepwalkers and maintains archaic laws, which state that one cannot refuse entry to any former residents to your home, "it's a law on the books, but not often practiced." The opening episode tells of the annual treasure hunt for a one-way train ticket, whereby "the idea was that after a whole day searching you were meant to realise that the treasure was Winnipeg itself, and no one ever took up the offer to leave," a testament to the captivating homing signals of the city towards its children. After discussing with his fellow Winnipeggers, Maddin had a stockpile of stories and began the lengthy process of editing. Ultimately he chose "those which satisfied my thirst for the macabre or the ire-producing." Maintaining a timeframe under 80 minutes made certain omissions necessary. "I had plenty of frozen animal stories, but I thought I'd better just include the one. There was even more than one Nazi invasion, but I thought again, better just include the one."

Maddin has a perplexing relationship with his hometown and the family that links him to it. The film's overriding premise is his perpetual struggle to leave, and the opening credits involve Maddin's sleepy train journey around Winnipeg's snaking network where lines meet, then part ways only to reconnect again in a seemingly endless cycle. This is a confusing, overly metaphorical introduction to what becomes a highly engaging and observant piece, with Maddin's





commentary maintaining an inherent connection between film and filmmaker throughout. Visually, *My Winnipeg* harks back to a bygone age, with black and white re-enactments initially filmed digitally, then being projected and re-shot in film. The orchestrated re-enactments combine with snippets of old newsreel footage so that “past and present always do exist together. It was pleasing for me to mingle them in that way with emulsion and pixels.”

My Winnipeg evokes contradictory emotions of both the surreal

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and the familiar, as in one episode in which Maddin’s sister returns from a car collision with a deer to be intuitively accused of seeing men by her mother. On the one hand the argument ticks all the usual teenaged clichés, but the dialogue soon lurches into the bizarre with the mother’s constant repetition of “deer, fur and blood.” For Maddin, the episode was a precise re-enactment, “spot on in spirit anyway” and the connection between his sister’s sex life and the deer was immediately apparent, “there was something feral on the fender that wasn’t even fooling me and I was a pre-sexual being. It was at that point that I felt like my mother’s son.” Maddin’s “mother fixation” is furthered to the point where she becomes the central character despite Maddin’s personal narration, and aged 87 throughout the flashbacks, she is the only constant. Upon introducing the cast, Maddin’s siblings are readily acknowledged as actors, but acclaimed 1950s actress, Ann Savage, is cast as the narrator’s actual mother. “It was important to me that my mother was portrayed as someone who was resisting real memory” and so the deception is maintained until the end credits.

The reception of the film among Winnipeg’s residents has pleasantly surprised Maddin, and even inspired a flurry of creativity

with initiatives “inviting people to write their own Winnipeg account, and I couldn’t believe it. Winnipeg surprised me again.” The sleepy hostile city that arouses a peculiar affection in its people seems to provide its own inspiration. Contradictions abound as the place, which seems at first glance so literally frozen and lacking dynamism, manages to repeatedly enchant Maddin to the point that he cannot leave. A particularly poignant musing is Maddin’s commentary over footprints in the snow on making a “positive artefact out of a negative thing.”

When asked about the relevance of the analogy to Winnipeg and his representation as a whole Maddin says, “I never really wrote the narration, I kind of improvised it, but the way we’re always tracked on a grander, more unfathomable way, our presence on the earth, these archaeological finds...that to do it over the course of one winter, that seemed like a nice idea. It did seem like a nice echo of some of the things that were going on in the film.” Ultimately making a positive artefact out of a negative thing summarises the film’s atmosphere — Maddin’s nostalgia and inert affection overwhelm his more practical determination to leave, and an influx of summer babies follows the drowning of a herd of horses, to create a new generation of Winnipeggers continuing the attachments of the last. We never bear witness to Maddin leaving Winnipeg, “I haven’t literally left everything behind, but maybe I never will” and so the city continues its enchantment over Maddin, and the rest of us, through his depiction of it.

My Winnipeg is showing at cinemas throughout the UK this summer including Cornerhosue in Manchester, FACT Liverpool, Hyde Park in Leeds, David Leon in Croydon, and Trinity Theatre Kent. For details of a screening near you visit www.yourwinnipeg.co.uk or www.sodapictures.com.

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