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My Winnipeg

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My Winnipeg

Abstract

This is a review of *My Winnipeg* (2007).

Ever since Augustine established the genre in the Fifth Century, autobiography has played a crucial role in the West, not simply in the presentation of a self but in its creation, in providing a model of what it means to be a self. Film has proved to be an active medium in the effort, as well, and we might think of the work of directors like Truffaut, Fellini, and Amodovar as autobiographers par excellence. It may be too early to add Guy Madden to that list, but, then again, maybe not, considering his superb latest film, *My Winnipeg*.

The story of *My Winnipeg* is simple: In a narrative voice-over and a scene of several people on a train, Guy Madden is trying to leave Winnipeg, the city of his birth. As the travelers struggle with sleep and the train moves through the city's streets, Madden recounts events from the city's history and from his life, mixed with the story of the making of the film.

We should note from the start that *My Winnipeg* is a truly strange film, but the adjective can easily be applied to the autobiographical work of Amodovar or to a film like *Les Quatre Cents Coups*, when it first appeared in 1959, and, of course, to the self, as well, from Augustine's "I am a problem to myself." Filmed largely in black and white, in a style reminiscent of the 1920s and '30s, with out-of-focus, near-subliminal title cards, and frequent crude snowy interludes, *My Winnipeg*, like the rest of Madden's work, is an acquired taste. The literary critics of the 1950s and 60s declared that a genuine autobiography (as opposed to a memoir or a diary or a

‘merely autobiographical’ work) needs to have coherence and cohesion, and be told from a single point of view, preferably late in life. It must present the single, unifying meaning of a life. *My Winnipeg* has little coherence or cohesion, and, instead, is a pastiche of outlandish and highly unreliable history, rumors, legends, and memories that bewilder perhaps more than they inform. Madden calls his film a “docu-fantasia,” an oxymoron if ever there was one. Viewers, grasping for sense, might settle on the film being a portrait of the unconscious, and perhaps that is right.

Augustine’s autobiography focuses on Thegaste, Carthage and Milan. Fellini’s *Amarcord* is centered on Rimini, his childhood home. The place that is to ground Madden’s film is Winnipeg, but it provides no foundation, no solidity. Its geography, at the fork of two rivers, only prompts the narrator’s assertion of mystical forking rivers below those on the earth’s surface, and his association of a similar fork in his mother’s anatomy. He claims the city’s streets are paralleled with a grid of off-the-map streets, patrolled by its own taxi fleet. The film is more concerned with buildings that have been demolished than those standings, with particular interest in hockey arenas, especially the Winnipeg Arena in whose locker room Madden claims to have been born.

It is a typically outlandish – and comical – claim, but the film’s Winnipeg is a place of bizarre pseudo-facts: that there are ten times more sleep-walkers in Winnipeg than anywhere on earth; that city ordinance gives sleep walkers the right

to visit prior homes and enter them; that there was an “As If” Day celebrated during World War II during which mock-Nazi troops took over the city and renamed it Himmlerville; that the city’s homeless are legally given the right to live on the tops of buildings; that the city’s largest bridge was originally designed for Cairo and yearns for the warm climates during Manitoba’s harsh winter; that there was once a séance involving city officials, the Ballet Club of Winnipeg, city prostitutes, and a gay buffalo named Broken Head; and that the local racetrack once burned and the horses fled into the Red River, there to freeze, their heads above the ice for the entire winter. There is much more. Magical Realism is not far away, but it is rendered through Madden’s distressed, regretful and yet fervid longings.

That the self is a construct is widely accepted, as is the notion that those forces that perform the building are religious by definition. A virtue of Madden’s *My Winnipeg* is that it makes us unusually aware of the act of construction by making such traditional elements as place, family, history, and memory so odd that we pay attention as we seldom do. Mainstream reviews of Madden’s film focus predictably on the truth or falsity of the story. And yet it is the effects of the film – that viewers are puzzled or fascinated, bored or put to sleep, stimulated to dream or prompted to re-imagine their own Winnipegs – that are more important.