THE CITY OF TRANSGRESSIVE DESIRES

Melodramatic Absurdity in Maddin’s The Saddest Music in the World (2003) and My Winnipeg (2007)

While Montréal and Toronto have attracted a plurality of cinematic interpretations, smaller Canadian cities generally lack the critical mass of filmmakers to do the same. Winnipeg stands at the same level as Québec City: it has only one prominent narrative filmmaker, Guy Maddin. Jason Woloski, writing in 2003, described Maddin’s importance in the province and the country: “In the pond of the Manitoba film industry, he is easily the biggest fish there is... Within the pond that is the Canadian film industry, Maddin as fish becomes a bit smaller.”¹ Since 2003, Maddin’s rise in the film world has accelerated. The two films discussed in this chapter, The Saddest Music in the World and My Winnipeg, have made major contributions to his growing stature both nationally and internationally. Maddin has gained this reputation by reimagining contemporary cinema in a style that so far has defied emulation. His creative
play on archaic film styles from the late silent and early talkie period (circa 1930) is unique in cinema. When *The Artist*, a silent film, won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2012, Maddin’s vision received a small measure of validation as a postmodernist conceit.

In comparison to the diverse films about Toronto or Montréal discussed earlier, the imaginings of this solo author formulate a singular cinematic Winnipeg. Maddin’s construction of Winnipeg is tied to an idiosyncratic artistic expression that makes its urban imaginary difficult to dissect. Maddin confirmed this difficulty when he explained his admiration for surrealist filmmaking, for what he described as “the idea of using completely disparate or unconnected objects and combining them to create a subconscious product and to create an indecipherable effect.” Deciphering Maddin’s Winnipeg is indeed as convoluted a task as deciphering films by the earlier surrealists.

In order to discover Maddin’s Winnipeg and to evaluate whether his work speaks for a wider sense of the city, one must first be able to read his style, which is remarkably nonconformist. He is the postmodernist *par excellence*: his deliberately retro film style is a playful “cocktail of contradictions” that aligns with the pastiche approach of postmodern art in borrowing elements from the past and wedding them to the present. In the two films discussed here, the use of this style to recreate Winnipeg leads the audience to see Winnipeg through an archaic lens that automatically turns the city into a historical artifact, a presence whose past is all absorbing. Winnipeg appears as a memory, a reconstructed past, a dream of what once was. While Lepage does something similar in *Le Confessionnal* through a straightforward use of flashbacks, his film always grounds its audience in the present. Maddin, in contrast, takes us immediately into the past of cinema and therefore the past of Winnipeg.

Both Robert Lepage and Guy Maddin were born in the cities featured in their films and both have created films that directly address their experience of growing up. *Le Confessionnal*’s discussion of cinematic art represented by Hitchcock’s *I Confess* posits a Hollywood Other that works to define the francophone city, its inhabitants, and their cultural identity vis-à-vis an Anglo-American opposite. Maddin reaches out to the otherness of the past in cinema by overtly referencing a variety of archaic black-and-white forerunners characterized by melodramatic gestures whose communicative power has dissipated, even disappeared, after eighty years of filmic development.
Using the forgotten codes of an earlier silent-screen language, he transforms what was into what is.

During the Q&A at a screening of *My Winnipeg* in Calgary, Maddin declared, “It is my mission to mythologize the place.” That certainly is a heady goal because it moves beyond the platitudes and stereotypes of public discourse about a city’s identity toward something resembling childhood enchantment. Non-Winnipegger Jason McBride visited Winnipeg during the shooting of Maddin’s *The Saddest Music in the World* in 2003 and reported that the city held little charm. But an entirely different Winnipeg existed inside the warehouse that served as the studio for *Saddest Music*. This was Maddin’s version of Depression-era Winnipeg—an enchanted realm of song, dance, and libidinal intrigue. The difference between the external real (physical) world open to sight and the surreal (psychological) internal world open to the imagination highlights the enjoyment that artifice can produce. Maddin’s ability to create a fantasy world as an inviting simulacrum of his superficially dull city is a reflection of both personal imaginative energy and the transformative power of cinema. The very concept of mythology used by Maddin suggests a legendary past that is always larger than life.

The impulse to mythologize also drove Lepage in *Le Confessionnal* and serves as a testimonial to the possibilities that come with creative engagement with a city on its own terms—as itself—rather than as a stand-in for some other place or historical period. This “as itself” does not refer to the documentarist’s struggle to articulate the factual or the actual via some resemblance to a socio-economic urban stasis; rather, it means the discovery within the filmmaker of an inner truth that links personal experience and understanding of an urban community with an auteurist’s projection of that community.

Smaller Canadian cities, like Winnipeg, have their own distinct history, which means that their postmodern urban imaginary engages with the cultural remnants of national realism, as well as history. The marginalization of a specific urban experience (life in contemporary Winnipeg, for example) within the national discourse dealing with what is important, valuable, and influential in urban matters (that is, in Montréal and Toronto) offers the filmmaker from such a marginalized centre an opportunity to codify that city in a way in which those who know it or have lived in it can comprehend. Maddin enters his own urban imaginary with such force and uncompromised style that Woloski...
rightly refers to him as “one of the most original, important filmmakers working today, regardless of geography or genre.”

Maddin’s highly original urban imaginary embraces ghosts of geographic determinism and once-popular cinematic conventions to construct a carnival of contradictions. In his vision, geography and history become mythology stripped of rational substance. Silent cinema, with its melodramatic gestures of pain and suffering, is transposed into the present, resulting in modes of expression that audiences read as comedic. Because Maddin has chosen to represent the world and Winnipeg through the artifice of early 1930s black-and-white cinema technologies and the melodrama genre, he has made the city magical to a contemporary audience. This is the strength that underlies the ability of his films to speak to a wide audience who may not know Winnipeg as a socioeconomic entity. Winnipeg as a socioeconomic entity lacks any magical stature. It is an old, rundown city with a central core that, in some areas, is akin to inner-city ghettos in the United States and with a civic pride linked to nostalgia for a former greatness. Winnipeg, in the agrarian period of the early twentieth century, was the metropolis of the Prairie region, funnelling homesteaders into the rural West. When the West as an agrarian powerhouse came to an end after World War II (and the Depression) and Winnipeg went into a steady decline. The rise and fall of this city is the background for Maddin’s interpretation of his home town. His backward-looking films imitate the city’s own “former-ness.” Maddin was born in 1956, when the still-vibrant city was starting on the road of gradual demise, so his half-century of Winnipeg life parallels the city’s transformation from metropolitan centre to marginality. His use of cinematic codes that were once central to the spectator but are now marginal or esoteric is a replay of the city’s historical trajectory. In a sense, contemporary Winnipeg is as alien to its former glory as his audience is to silent cinema. When Maddin tries to resurrect that historical past, he does so against the background of a diminished present.

A crucial aspect of Maddin’s union of geography (the real) and genre (the theatrical) is its inherent potential for visual innovation. The two opposing forces of materiality and artifice create a conflicted site where the artist is free to create whichever resolution he wishes. Because Maddin recreates archaic film styles that the contemporary audience finds alien, he can bring to his films his own creative codes drawn from three-quarters of a century of cinematic
development. He is a contemporary who gazes backward and is enthralled
by what he sees and then tries to convince his audience that they should be
equally enthralled, at least in the version that Maddin concocts. The audi-
ence for his films can be either entranced by his novel cinematic treatments
or confused and alienated by his re-creation of generic codes that they cannot
comprehend. For his fans, he is so engaged with projecting the artifice of
cinema, so overt in his display of artfulness, that they find him to be the quint-
essential filmmaker’s filmmaker. His films become a kind of museum that we
walk through gawking at the displays of the unusual.

Scholar and writer Will Straw believes that Maddin’s blending of the
“Canadian, regional, and independent” with “the rituals of more official and
monumental cinemas”—that is, the regional with the international—is the
reason for his success. The marriage of the local and the global through the his-
tory of forgotten cinematic forms gives Maddin’s films a certain liberating scope
by which he leaps over the national cinema issue of the late twentieth century.
He is so far removed from the mainstream of national cinema that his sui generis
style becomes instantly global. By going backwards and recreating the spirit of
long-gone national cinemas, Maddin is actually furthering cinematic discourse
and projecting it into the future. Whether it is the 1920s formalism of Russian
montage or the shadowy angularity of German expressionism or the 1930s flam-
boyance of the Hollywood musical that he plugs into his aesthetic, they become
fresh and even avant-garde because of their resurrective quality. His films are
novel. He mythologizes not only the silent film and the semi-talkie but also the
Winnipeg life and times of Guy Maddin. No other filmmaker in Canada is so
aesthetically cerebral and emotionally visceral in his exploration of the mean-
ing of his home city and his place in it. He presents his imaginative rootedness
in that city as so perplexing and unnerving to himself that his relationship to it
becomes a portal to all human consciousness.

Maddin’s work has been described as “retro-pastiche” and as “exhaust-
ingly delirious.”10 These descriptors reflect his obsessive engagement with the
filmmaking styles of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Single-handedly, Maddin
has pulled the archaic black-and-white semi-talkie from historical obscurity to
contemporary cult status through the artifice of “imitating” it. Like a magician,
he has raised these forms from the dead and turned them into delightful zom-
bies, which we should enjoy and not dread.
Maddin was first noticed in 1988 for his ultra-low-budget film, *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, which set the absurdist tone for his later films, including *Archangel* (1990), set in World War I Russia, and *Careful* (1992), set in the 1830s in the German Alps, where everyone must speak in whispers to avoid triggering avalanches. In each film, he pursues the pain of eros, portrayed in the melodramatic exaggerations of silent film codes. “Melodrama and surrealistism were put on this earth,” he once said, “to tell love stories,” and, in every case, the stories in his films are “love” stories of one kind or another.11 Although he made other feature films, including *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997), it was the short film *The Heart of the World* (2000), shown at the Toronto International Film Festival, that first brought him to prominence. Critics lauded it as the best film of the whole festival, and it later won a Genie for Best Live Action Short Drama. This recognition resulted in a $3.8 million budget for *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003), starring Isabella Rossellini.12 The film is set in Winnipeg during the Great Depression, where a local beer baroness launches a contest to discover the saddest music in the world. At the same time, Maddin also released *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2003), the first of his “Me Trilogy,” which was followed by *Brand upon the Brain* (2006) and finally *My Winnipeg* (2007), all of which explore the fabulist life of one Guy Maddin, their protagonist. In a 2005 email to Michael Burns of the Documentary Channel, who commissioned the film, Maddin wrote about his relationship to his city: “To me Winnipeg is a supernatural city of enchanted palimpsests, stories and memories piled on top of one another. Some of these narratives have been completely covered up by time before new histories were written over top of them; other stories bleed through and persist in being legible at all times.”13 Maddin’s literary style, even in an email, expresses the convoluted and mischievous mentality that infects his films as well as the radical difference between an auteur’s project of mythologizing a city and the typical civic boosterism and crude stereotyping that most cities carry as the genus of their identities.

Maddin, who identifies strongly with his Icelandic heritage, was raised in an apartment above his mother’s beauty salon on the city’s downtown Ellice Avenue, became immersed in hockey because his father was the general manager of the Winnipeg Maroons hockey team, suffered through the suicide of a brother, and discovered filmmaking after the age of thirty. In writing his film
scripts, he has collaborated with University of Manitoba film and drama pro-
fessor George Toles. In spite of the collaboration, Maddin has been able to
leave an auteurist stamp on each film and on his œuvre. Critic Geoff Pevere
calls Maddin “a resolute fabulist” whose films “feel like the nocturnal fevers
of some film-pickled collective unconscious.” The metaphor of the feverish
mind losing touch with reality is taken up by Anthony Lane’s review in The
New Yorker, in which Lane compares viewing The Saddest Music in the World
to picking up “an old copy of National Geographic, while running a fever of
a hundred and three.” Everything becomes surreal, zany, and incongruous.
Both Saddest Music and My Winnipeg are amazing dreamscapes where the
real and the unreal, ghosts and their embodiment, self-defeating heroes and
triumphant losers are enmeshed in phantasmagorical imagery and Freudian
symbolism that creates a mytho-fantastic ethos.

In Saddest Music, one of the genres that brings the mytho-fantastic
to the film is the ostentatious American musical of the 1930s. During the
Depression, one could lose oneself in the fantasy world of large-cast musical
numbers, beautiful people, and lavish sets, and thereby forget dreary reality.
These musicals were often set in Los Angeles or New York, coded as centres
of glamour, wealth, and success. Maddin has cheekily recoded unglamor-
ous Winnipeg into this illusionary world. This reimagining of Winnipeg as a
place central to humanity and on par with cities like London—the setting of
Saddest Music’s original script by Kazuo Ishiguro, which Maddin rewrote for
his film—is precisely the kind of equation in which Maddin revels. He uses
cinema to mythologize or glamorize any place and any person. He is able to
put any subject and any locale through the wringer of his schooled anachronis-
tic imagination and produce something fresh and attractive that is reminiscent
of but not the same as past genres. Maddin’s “excavation of historical styles,” as
theorist Will Straw calls it, leads contemporary viewers who lack a context for
these styles to experience culture shock. This is precisely the audience that
Maddin wants to address and where he wants to plant his art. He wants viewers
to enter his generic codes with the same sense of play and carnival that he has.
Although the audience may not be as knowledgeable of the past as he is, they
can enter it under his magician’s guidance.

Winnipeg is represented in Maddin’s films as a dream-like state, a polyga-
mous marriage of geography, history, psychology, and film genre. In both
Saddest Music and My Winnipeg, Maddin becomes an archaeologist of the city’s somewhat nebulous soul, probing into different layers of its psychic history, discovering pseudo-artifacts, which he then arranges in a museum-like setting. What he puts on display for our edification is everything from mummified remains, still-life tableaux, and preposterous observations to poignant images from his own life. Darren Wershler, in a recent monograph on Maddin, refers to the result as “differential cinema.” Difference works best in the context of similarity, and that is the premise on which Maddin constructs his films. Like dreams, they offer bits and pieces of reality assembled in an uncanny way. At first, we are lost in the dream; then we wake up, and if we remember it, we dismiss it as a dream, as unreal. Wershler claims that in a film like My Winnipeg, “the difference between the everyday and the fantastic . . . crumbles.” In other words, we are always conscious in his films of fantasy being fantasy, of dreams being dreams, and of fantasy’s appropriation of the real to further its own goals of provocation and introspection.

Maddin’s protracted investigative gaze into yesterday’s film styles as the womb that gave birth to today’s codes plays with his audience’s disconnection with the past, forcing viewers to deal with the unfamiliar in some meaningful way. Because Maddin is so knowledgeable about these film styles and their nuances, he can offer his audience all sorts of seemingly outlandish scenarios that can be bewildering. This results in an experience of the uncanny, because we are situated by his films as strangers entering the gravitational field of an alien planet we need to explore. For those unaccustomed to melodramatic hyperbole or the archaic film genres that Maddin plays with, his films are impenetrable distractions whereby the normative desire to suspend disbelief and enter the illusion of the film is blocked. The concepts of différence (the endless deferral of meaning) and aporia (the constant gap in meaning) posited by the poststructuralist Jacques Derrida as postmodern modes of perception provide a way of entering Maddin’s cinematic textuality. His archaeological methodology as a filmmaker reflects the Derridean concept of “trace”—the disembodied manifestation of “a disintegrated past, consumed by the fires of time.” The present is haunted by these traces of the past, of which we are insufficiently self-conscious but which Maddin, the psychic archaeologist, is happy to dredge up. The resulting reconstructions of the former self of either the individual (Maddin’s mother, for example) or the collectivity (the
The people of Winnipeg) are riddled with unresolved tensions. In Maddin’s films, reality is nothing more than a shorthand postcard message: “Having a good time, see you soon, etc.” The main message is carried by the image on the front of the card, which is invariably pleasant and appealing. Reality is just a picture that fits our fantasy.

Maddin is pleased to offer his audience contemporary sensibilities dressed up as the past in a form that is beyond the memory of the film’s viewers (unless they are students of film). Not knowing that earlier language means that the audience must create a universe of self-generated connections. Wershler, drawing on Deleuze, explains: “When we cannot remember something exactly, what we see in our mind’s eye connects to a range of powerful possibilities: déjà vu, dream images, fantasies, scenes recollected from favourite plays, movies and television.”22 The audience is forced to engage with the film through its own wellsprings of imagery and memories. Maddin’s reanimation of the past works through his playing with absences—historical, technological, cultural. Whether he is recreating a pseudo-autobiography or a pseudo-urban history, Maddin manufactures ghosts. Woloski uses the term “haunting” to indicate how film’s spectral emanations come from Maddin’s interpretation of consciousness.23 But Maddin also likes to play the role of the pseudoscientist, the archaeologist uncovering a hidden past and then recovering the artifact (his autobiography) with a novel context such as a museum display disguised as a film. Inevitably, the location where he does his excavation is his personal psychovisceral history, which he then displays in the medium of a simulacrum of the archaic. This excavation of his own psyche is a perfect match for his cinematic “excavation of historical styles.”24 Both are surreal exercises that have a connection to reality, historical and psychological, but in a mythopoeic way.

The historical or “real” Winnipeg is the baseline for his excavations, what Wershler calls the “documentary” side of his films, but that side is always interpretive.25 Those who were raised in Winnipeg or live there can recognize mythologized characteristics, while those for whom the city is a stranger can experience the impact of an evocative, suggestive atmosphere that mimics universal psycho-urban spaces. What comes to mind is the metaphor of a cyclotron smashing subatomic particles in order to create energy, in which one particle, Maddin’s libido (the dream), smashes into another
particle, a restrictive superego (historical fact), to produce a combined
dream-like historical document (the film). The clash of personal narrative and
the general history of the city results in a highly personalized urban history
that speaks of the uniqueness of each person’s urban reality. David Church
describes Maddin’s films as “an uncanny amalgamation of personal obses-
sions and private memories made public.”26 Public obsessions and memories
are privatized within the individual and so are transformed. When Maddin’s
libido collides with Winnipeg’s history, the result is a mesmerizing mix of the
archaic and the erotic. His fetishization of Winnipeg gives it a gloss of sexual
transgressiveness that is both disturbing and hilarious. But he means to rep-
resent every urban person’s own psychological connection to his or her city.
Whatever the historical specificity of any city, the human response has an
underlying universality.

Maddin’s matching of the former glory of silent cinema and the former
glory of Winnipeg itself means that the city’s demise also matches the demise
of a former dominant art form. Maddin, who once described himself as a
necrophiliac when it came to silent cinema, is also a necrophile of the city,
whose inner life has been drained over time. He displays a “stubborn faith-
fulness to Winnipeg” that can be considered a kind of death watch.27 Here is
a white, middle-aged, heterosexual male who has been witness to the inexo-
rable demise of a city into the decrepitude of premature old age. No wonder he
wants to recreate a 1930s Winnipeg, a city that was the centre of its regional
universe. Maddin states that his own grandmother, whom he claims was born
the year Winnipeg was incorporated as a city and whom he knew, is evidence
of the youth of the city and its premature aging. His conflation of family and
city, of the biological and the sociological, the autobiographical and the histori-
cal, geography and genre, results in an absurd, macabre sensibility that is both
totally idiosyncratic and totally believable.

SAD EYES, SAD HEARTS, AND THE SADDEST MUSIC IN THE WORLD

Considered by most commentators as Maddin’s most accessible narrative,
Saddest Music is also his first film to feature Winnipeg. All his previous films
were set in other locales. Saddest Music premiered at the Sundance Film
Festival in early 2003. It went on to win several Genies for best music, editing, and costuming. The original film script was written by Kazuo Ishiguro, who set it in London in the mid-1980s. Rhombus Films, which had film rights to Ishiguro’s script, handed the script to Maddin. He and George Toles rewrote the script, translating mid-1980s London into mid-1930s Winnipeg. In keeping with the script’s international theme, Maddin hired Isabella Rossellini to play the part of Lady Helen Port-Huntley, a legless beer baroness, who has organized a competition for the saddest music in the world to promote her beer. By introducing a major star to complement his no-name cast, Maddin changed the trajectory of his work, making it resemble, in some ways, a more typical mainstream Hollywood product. His use of the gala musical form only adds to his film’s superficial resemblance to Hollywood. What was mainstream eighty years ago (the Depression musical) becomes contemporary kitsch in Maddin’s hands. Maddin prefers to give all his feature films, including this one, a melodramatic plot because melodrama is, for him, “the narrative of our dreams with all the nocturnal terrors and desires.” This positing of the phantasmagorical dreamscape as a valid narrative form moves beyond the playful, escapist Hollywood genre. His resurrected cinematic forms are suffused with an indulgent baroque quality. In an essay titled “Death in Winnipeg,” he writes in the language of hyperbole that matches the exaggerated melodramatic gestures of the silent cinema: “My city is plunged in the perpetual night of its notorious winter, lugubriously ice-encrusted, bedecked with crystalline stalactites . . . all arrayed behind an intricate scrimshaw of frost.”

Such flights of literary fancy eventually filter into his construction of Winnipeg’s identity as the perpetually winterbound city portrayed in Saddest Music. Its interiors are steamy and overheated, while its exteriors are manifestations of snowflake heaven. He presents a mise en scène that is quickly read as artificial: when added to the heavily filtered visual tones, this provides a childlike magic to his imagery. In Saddest Music, he moves the daytime universe of “Winterpeg’s” glaring, sun-sparkling, snowy winterscapes into the nightland of dream, where everything is muted by atmosphere and shadow. Even the brightest whites become filmy, unfocused, and bathed in an off-light, often weak and barely illuminating. The visual presentation of most of the film’s scenes is deliberately off-kilter, so the audience is never quite certain what it is viewing other than a sense of the make-belief. Winnipeg itself is reconstructed
by a combination of primitive lighting, low-budget miniature sets, absurdly retro costuming, and over-the-top melodramatic dialogue. William Beard describes the Winnipeg of Saddest Music as “houses angled Expressionistically and sunk to the gables in snowdrifts, hunched and shuffling passers-by bundled up against the cold, but also pajama-clad sleepwalkers perambulating like zombies.”31 As an ex-Winnipegger, I view Maddin’s urban imaginary as superior to the documentarist’s realism in conveying a city’s identity because it evokes my childhood memories and a powerful psychological bonding with the urbanscape. As writer Graeme Smith observes, “stepping into somebody’s personal dreamscape can be unnerving.”32 Yet only by entering Maddin’s urban dreamscape can we begin to connect with the city’s essential humanity and to understand his view that only through the convoluted psychological mechanisms by which a city’s inhabitants actually read their city can we appreciate the city for what it is to them, and maybe to us.

If Winnipeg’s architecture can be used a stand-in for American cities like Chicago in the 1930s, then why can’t the city be a stand-in for itself in an imagined or fanciful urbanity? Film knows no bounds in creating verisimilitude. Maddin’s unpacking of the period begins with his characterization of Winnipeg as a global centre, which even in its heyday it never was. (If any midwestern city had a global reputation in the 1930s, it was Chicago.) In Saddest Music, however, Winnipeg’s motto is “World Capital of Sorrow.” This satirizing of urban branding and hucksterism combines a manic festival of song and dance with desperation.33 Writing about the film in the Globe and Mail, Liam Lacey references the antics of “screwball comedies” of the 1930s era and the “stage extravagances” that were meant to represent a life somewhere over the rainbow.34 The sad “happiness” of inebriation reflected in the phrase “drowning your sorrows in beer” is part of Maddin’s social satire. The theme of drowning is a highly charged one. When the winning contestants slide into a vat of beer for a beer bath, some of them almost drown. While this is an obvious reference to bubble baths in frothy musicals, it also makes reference to Winnipeg’s own history of coming close to “drowning” through ferocious floods that have struck the city from time to time. This blend of absurdity and historical events (the Depression era in North America was filled with crazy and dangerous contests) gives this film a rich illusionary quality, like the contests and the films of that time.
Maddin suggests that all urban dwellers also have their own libidinal investment in their specific urbanities. The Oedipal complexes involving a deceased mother, a father (Fyodor) and his two sons (Chester and Roderick), and their shared women (Narcissa and Helen, or Lady Port-Huntley) constitute the libidinal element in the film. The unravelling of bizarre love triangles within the family provides a transgressive sexual content to human life in the city. Like dreams themselves, Maddin's representation of people, events, and locales is strangely connected and suggestive. In the film, the hidden layers of the subconscious self are transferred to the psyche of the city, with its persona as the capital of sorrow presenting a twisted and haunted self. This is a vicious digging into unresolved familial emotional meltdowns using a pickaxe.

Beginning with a grainy black-and-white colour scheme that immediately signifies the past, Maddin makes Winnipeg, in both Saddest Music and My Winnipeg, a symbol of what once was rather than what is. The transference of history into the present moment, thus making history “live,” produces a mental leap that is disquieting. Which Winnipeg is this—a dead or lost Winnipeg or a Winnipeg that is somehow “eternal”? This going back suggests that the city’s former glory is the best comfort zone for the audience as well as for Maddin. The film’s co-writer, Georges Toles, in an essay written before Saddest Music, describes Maddin’s view of time as amnesic and memory as “tricky.” For him, Winnipeg remembered is really a Winnipeg that has been forgotten, a Winnipeg whose memories have been repressed. Remembering as forgetting produces a sense of being lost. The city’s past is lost and is only recoverable as a facade. Its characters are equally lost as they go through the film’s narrative trajectory. The audience becomes lost in both the historical construction of Winnipeg and its narrative evolution. Maddin's play with the city's history is ultimately make-believable. Maddin calls this “an uninhibiting of real life.” The loss of inhibition that he champions releases pent-up emotions and hidden symbols that resurrect the forgotten and repressed side of being urban.

The film opens with a strangely dressed shaman fortune-teller with antlers on his head, who issues a prophetic warning to Chester Kent (Mark McKinney), a sleazy and penniless New York producer, that his fate is doomed now that he is in Winnipeg. On Chester’s arm is a petite, waif-like female
named Narcissa (Maria de Medeiros), former wife of Chester’s brother Roderick Kent, a.k.a. Gavrilö the Great (Ross McMillan), now an overly sensitive, melancholic cello virtuoso from Serbia. The love triangle between Chester (representing the United States), Roderick (representing Europe), and Narcissa is augmented by their father, Fyodor Kent (David Fox), who is Canadian. Fyodor is an alcoholic ex-doctor turned streetcar driver and prosthesis hobbyist. The geopolitical metaphor of the Kent family trinationality is obvious: Canada is a cross between Europe and America. Curiously, the absurdity of a Canadian father with two Canadian sons from the same mother, one of whom is a Serb and the other an American, is a perfectly normal allegory of Canadian identity both as immigration and emigration. Fyodor, who appears next as a streetcar driver, tells Narcissa that the man she is with (Chester) “may have the stink of an American but he’s one hundred per cent Canadian.”

From the opening scene, everyone is dressed for the cold. Winnipeg is established as a northern city not only by the winter coats but also by the shaman’s reading of Chester’s fortune on a block of ice, which replaces the iconic crystal ball. “Look into the ice,” he tells Chester. After their streetcar ride, the couple ends up in a beer hall, where everyone is wrapped in parkas, coats, and warm hats. This is “Winterpeg,” the city’s Canadian nickname. The theme of the frozen north moves effortlessly into another aspect of Winnipeg, which is sorrow. When Lady Port-Huntley (Isabella Rossellini) announces that her beer company, Muskeg Beer, will hold a contest for the saddest music in the world, she calls the award “the crown of frozen tears.” Winnipeg, we are told, has been named the World Capital of Sorrow for four years running. This implausible branding is used by Maddin to indicate how a negative can be turned into a positive—how a city of cold and sorrow can attract the world as long as money is involved. And what was Winnipeg historically, if not a creation (after its days as Fort Garry) of economic hope? The class divide that the film highlights begins with Helen (Lady Port-Huntley) commenting on the obscene amount of money she is making off the drinking masses and on how she hopes to make even more from the benighted Americans when Prohibition is lifted. Maddin portrays Lady Port-Huntley as a singular capitalist success, a woman whose wealth and power depends on the masses drowning their sorrows in her beer. Coming in from the cold, Winnipeggers of every lowly stripe receive the false heat of alcohol in her depressing and unheated beer parlours.
The link between class and ethnicity that is central to Winnipeg’s historical identity as a working-class city of European immigrants is referenced by Lady Port-Huntley’s representing the Anglo elite, the historical moneyed class of the city, who initially built their wealth by managing the grain trade and supplying the agrarian hinterland. But Helen represents a woman with more than financial capital. She also has a great deal of erotic capital. Fyodor (a true Canadian) has been enamoured of her for years, but it is Chester (an ersatz American) who steals her. Helen is also the substitute mother figure. She is enthroned throughout most of the film like a woman on a pedestal because she lost her legs in a car accident while the drunken Chester was driving. The omnipresent Fyodor ended up amputating both her legs. Living the American dream of rags to riches, she rose above her infirmities, while the legged Fyodor and his two penniless sons, Chester and Roderick, are mired in poverty-stricken self-pity, self-delusion, and self-hatred.

Class and ethnicity are linked to Winnipeg’s growth through immigration, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the West was being settled. The radio contest for the saddest music in the world attracts competitors from every corner of the globe. They arrive by train—one of Maddin’s iconic images of Winnipeg, which once had the largest train yards in the British Empire. The competitors pour into Winnipeg under an overhead sign reading “Lost Luggage.” This comment on lost identity and on refugees and migrants as penniless, hungry masses swarming into this cold, godforsaken place to make their fortune is a perfect metaphor for Winnipeg’s past. Roderick arrives from Serbia, wearing a ridiculously wide-brimmed black hat draped with a filmy veil of the sort worn by nineteenth-century female mourners. Maddin is presenting two stereotypical sides of the male psyche—Roderick’s feminine, artistic side and Chester’s macho self-confidence. The latter is all about making it and the former is all about feeling it. The sibling rivalry and Oedipal complex seem to flow from the loss of their mother, for whom Roderick is perpetually grieving and whom Chester has long forgotten. The American emphasis on happiness and going forth into a bright future is contrasted with the European emphasis on the value of the past and memorializing the deceased, like the nine million killed in World War I. The clash of optimism and pessimism, future and past, results in a dramatic resolution in which the present is simply a moment of flight.
and confusion. Canada, as the present, is caught between the two poles of American futurism and European historicism. Poor old Fyodor bungles along to the grave as the more powerful gravitational forces of Europe and America exist in an uneasy equilibrium in the Canadian psyche, which, in a sense, unbalances it and makes it uncertain and confused over its identity.

The metaphorical clash between sensitivity and insensitivity, between European feeling for the genuine and American show biz glitz, is Maddin’s definition of what it is to be Canadian—neither, and yet perhaps both. Being a Canadian like Fyodor leads to alcoholism, degradation, and obsession. This melancholia becomes Winnipeg’s mood. It comes about from being trapped in the claustrophobic cold of the North with its long, long nights (there are no daylight scenes in the film), where people try to forget their sorry state through drunkenness and the only source of heat is the flames that engulf the beer hall as Chester sings a melancholic farewell. The pyre of self-immolation is the only way to make Winnipeg warm.

One of the motifs in Saddest Music that stands in for Maddin’s relationship to the city is the figure of the sleepwalker, who makes a brief cameo appearance. Winnipeg as a city of sleepwalkers is a subject taken up more gleeefully by Maddin in My Winnipeg, but it is introduced here. The sleepwalker as the quintessential Winnepegger is Maddin’s metaphor for film as the expression of the dream state. Maddin is lost in his dream state that is cinema. When the characters in the film dream, they dream, whether flashback or flash forward, in two colours to contrast with the black-and-white main narrative. The use of such retrograde colouring (retrograde for us but advanced for its fictive time) to signify our unconscious fantasies only heightens their importance. Either prominently blue or red, the colours imply certain melodramatic moods, but their garishness also signifies artificiality. Seeing Winnipeg primarily in black and white, as a city of night and perpetual artificial lighting, represented by the amnesiac Narcissa dressed either in snow white or in widow’s black, one is meant to read reality or actuality as a stark binary—good or evil, happy or sad, rich or poor, and so on. But the colour dream life in the film represents the psyche’s true home. In a sense, Maddin overturns the world of Winnipeg and its characters by substituting psychic dream life for reality. The urban landscape of everyday reality is the true realm of sleepwalking that leaves us unaware of what we are doing, while the psychological self that we
repress is rich, energetic, and fundamentally engaging. There is colour where our fantasies play but dullness where our feet walk. To locate this urbanscape in an imaginary realm, Maddin presents Winnipeg as a city without high-rise towers or office buildings. Instead, his urban facades are singular rundown buildings, large Orthodox crosses, and meandering streets like one might find in a village. Any realistic urbanity has been removed and replaced with an illusionary world of the simple and the symbolic. The stage on which the musicians and dancers compete is drawn geometrically, reminiscent of German expressionist decor from the 1920s. This staging is then reflected in the staged constructions of Winnipeg’s angular buildings that never stand at right angles but always look ramshackle and ready to collapse. This is a fairy tale universe, a backdrop to myth and fantasy.

Winnipeg, the city of perpetual snow and night and derelict buildings, whose only happiness seems to be in outdoor hockey players singing as they skate, is represented as a one-season city and a poster child for sadness. In the end, Chester is killed by a distraught Lady Port-Huntley with a piece of broken glass from her beer-filled glass legs that Fyodor has made for her. The legs shatter when Roderick plays his cello in the final round and beats out Chester, who has enlisted national teams from around the world for his musical extravaganza by telling them he will pay their way home when he wins. Of course, he doesn’t and the dupes are all left stranded in Winnipeg like the real immigrants before them.

The binary opposition between remembering (memory) and forgetting (amnesia) that supposedly characterizes Winnipeg becomes even more pronounced later in My Winnipeg, when Maddin dredges up all kinds of “facts” about the city that he then massages into his own subversive universe of half-truths, lies, and imaginative surprises. Saddest Music ends with a surfeit of iconic imagery—Lady Port-Huntley’s American portrayal of the Statue of Liberty in Chester’s grand finale and Chester, Nero-like, playing the piano while the fantasy world around him burns up as a sign of the film’s ending.

The characters that Maddin has placed in his Winnipeg match the two-dimensional cardboard facades that he uses to represent the city’s physical space. This is a city without any vistas, a city whose buildings are smaller than the people on the street. Everything is shrunken. Maddin sees film as a liberation from reality for the audience. He makes solid use of generational
struggle (fathers and sons), class (the Anglo and the ethnic), and psychological concepts such as Freud’s Oedipal complex and Jung’s archetypes. He also adapts his archaic film genre to elements of farce, as people rush to and fro in a constant haze of misunderstanding. Together, these elements form an intricate complexity, a web of meanings that are not easy to negotiate but that eventually work for today’s audiences because of the numerous and disparate associations they make. The real geography that Maddin the archaeologist has exposed in Saddest Music is one that is psychic (the shaman opens and closes the film) rather than physical. He has turned the real history of Winnipeg upside down. He has reversed history through fantasy, turning it into a work of art.

SEARCHING FOR EVERYONE’S “MY WINNIPEG”

There isn’t that much generic distance between the fictional mode of Saddest Music and the “docu-fantasy” mode of My Winnipeg, the final instalment of Maddin’s autobiographical trilogy. My Winnipeg won Best Canadian Feature at the Toronto International Film Festival and Best Feature Film from the Toronto Film Critics Association. That Torontonian cinephiles can appreciate the film’s charms confirms William Beard’s observation that My Winnipeg has proven to be Maddin’s most popular film. How does a film that identifies Winnipeg, a city that Beard calls “unremarkable and isolated,” generate such critical approval? It must contain universal archetypes that appeal to a broad audience.

The film begins with the most universal of archetypes, the Mother—supposedly Maddin’s mother. She is a played by Ann Savage, a starlet of 1950s B-film fame. Mother is also the mother city, the maternal umbrella under which he was raised. But for Maddin, the city’s persona as a nurturing mother is twisted into a nagging, harassing, judgmental archetype—more aged crone than youthful beauty. Her appearance is followed by Maddin’s own voice-over narration pretending, like Léolo’s diary, to be the authentic voice of the self. In certain screenings of the film, Maddin himself gave a live voice-over. The script pronounces a desperate triple incantation while taking the proverbial train out of town:
Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Snowy, sleepwalking Winnipeg.

My home for my entire life. My entire life.

I must leave it. I must leave it. I must leave it now.\(^{42}\)

We then enter the narrative of Maddin’s failure to leave, to break with his mother city, to grow up and be a man free of her clutches. This image of a young man trying to flee the maternal nest has been played out innumerable times. Anyone with a youthful fantasy of going to the bright lights of a metropolitan centre—be it Toronto, New York, London or Paris—can identify with it. The Mother and the theme of escape resonate with audiences. The characterization is a lot simpler than that of the Oedipal *Saddest Music*. Maddin has hooked us on Winnipeg because it is no longer Winnipeg, the real; instead it is Winnipeg, our mindscape. His mother is our mother, all mothers.

Maddin’s initial model for *My Winnipeg* was Walter Ruttmann’s 1928 *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*.\(^{43}\) Ruttmann’s film mythologizes the city as it was in the roaring 1920s. Maddin had a similar mythologizing intent for his film. “I wanted to show people what it’s like to live here in a mythic way,” he said.\(^{44}\) But the mythic elements he refers to are his own referential combos: snow and sleepwalking, entrapment and dreams, memory and family, juvenile lusts and middle-aged regrets and disappointments. Familial life—and by extension, city life—becomes a series of inexplicable, mysterious traumas that linger on and on, the past infecting the present with reverberations of irrational occurrences.

Mythologizing Winnipeg is reflected in the real life experience of a certain Mr. Nguyen, the Vietnamese immigrant tailor whose shop occupies the space once used by Maddin’s mother and her sister Lil as a beauty salon. Mr. Nguyen’s shop front appears several times in the film. Mr. Nguyen stated in
an interview that he has ended up being a costume tailor for Hollywood films shot in Winnipeg (including *Capote*), something he never would have imagined when he came to the city in 1989. “Who thought I’d be working on Hollywood movies in Winnipeg,” he mused. “But with life, you never know.”45 It was Maddin’s intervention that turned the tailor’s real life into a Hollywood fantasy. He gave the shop a mythic trajectory because of his connection with it.

Mythologizing is a process of turning the real into a suprahuman reality that remains connected to the real in some way. Turning actuality into fantasy is a very powerful alchemy that lies at the core of the auteur persona. Although *My Winnipeg*, in keeping with its memoirist tone, has a much slower pace than the frenetic cacophony of rapid-fire images in *Saddest Music*, the film retains the undertone of melancholy that distinguishes *Saddest Music*. This emotion permeates the Maddin oeuvre and thus infects his Winnipeg. *My Winnipeg* contains important references to a former “Happyland” in Winnipeg that no longer exists, and the film ends with a “what if” proclamation of a return to Happyland. Here again is the facade of memory masquerading as historical fact. A nostalgized past will come alive, and as it does, present-day adult sadness will evaporate. Madden plays up the ironic and the tragi-comic aspects of this return by revealing that happiness is a facade created to hide the underlying sadness of existence. The generalized lost childhood of “happiness” that adults fantasize returning to is exposed by Maddin as a false front. “The seismograph of my childhood,” Maddin told a reporter, “and the seismograph of the fictional Guy Maddin would be close.”46 This effective union of reality and fantasy under the sign of a morose moon is repeated in the 2010 publication of the script for *My Winnipeg*, a book that combines the script with interviews, essays, and images from the film and from Maddin’s life. In the book, Maddin expertly weaves fact and fiction into misleading accounts of his life, all in the interests of mythologizing Winnipeg and himself.

Maddin’s form of authorship, a meticulous unravelling of an autobiographical thread that seems to reveal nothing much except trauma, is a key aspect of the argument made in this current volume about the city and the self. Maddin believes that it is foolhardy for an auteur to ignore the autobiographical.47 But what distinguishes Maddin’s autobiographical impulse from that of other auteurs discussed in this book is his ability to memorialize the past as living artifact. His art reminds us constantly of its backward-looking
stance and of how such a stance impacts cinema in Canada and cinema practitioners in general. The past is presented using an archaic mode rather than a mode that belongs to the present. He tries to confuse us, tries to make the dead look alive, but in a dead-like way. The genius of his authorship is his uncanny ability to stage the past and its characters inside a personal fantasyscape. The use of occasional iconic artifacts (streetcars, trains, crosses) is suggestive of an actual urbanscape rather than a re-creation. The term “docufantasy” is a perfect statement of Maddin’s delight in the union of opposites, in the marriage of differing sensibilities, which he stretches out into a lengthy DNA sequence described by one writer as “a vaporish melange of civic history, archival footage, bald-faced fabrication and wheedling confessional,” resulting in “a city reconfigured as dreamscape.” Maddin actually glorifies the past as a realm worth living in. His act of resurrecting deceased genres, the ghosts of torn-down buildings like Eaton’s and the Winnipeg Arena, dead family members, and long-gone sports heroes challenges his audiences to do likewise in their own lives and for their own personal cities. By excluding the rural and the wilderness from any sense of his Canadian selfhood, Maddin’s urban imaginary becomes a purist’s act of urban devotion. Home, family, love, and death are what the city is.

Katherine Monk, who explores so well the sexual underpinnings of Canadian cinema in Weird Sex and Snowshoes (2002), reviewed My Winnipeg. “This is definitely his Winnipeg,” she writes, and later goes on to describe the film’s mood as “somewhere between the angst-laden strains of The Twilight Zone and the overly earnest frames of early National Film Board reels.” This bipolar description shows Maddin both inhabiting and satirizing Hollywood and Canadian national cinema. Monk characterizes My Winnipeg, along with his other films, as “mutant fusions of high art film and lowbrow humour.” Again, Maddin’s power to mutate genres, to play successfully with opposites, allows him to formulate his own cross-genre films, created from fragments and obscure artifacts.

Another journalistic perception of mixing is that of Peter O’Neil, who called My Winnipeg a blend of the tragedian Igmar Bergman’s fictional The Seventh Seal with the tragi-comic documentarist Michael Moore’s Roger and Me. Like Monk, he points out Maddin’s ability to pull together very different film styles. Both Monk’s and O’Neil’s observations parallel Maddin’s
own bipolar take on Canadian identity in Saddest Music. “I couldn’t separate my Winnipeg from my home; my hometown from my home or my family,” Maddin told film reviewer Jay Stone. “They’re all entangled, so I just knew immediately that those three layers would have to be presented . . . simultaneously.”52 This biographical/historical mix is precisely how any inhabitant experiences his or her urban life, especially from the perspective of memory. Certain traumas are fused in the psyche, and they rise above the everyday flow of events that disappear into each other. These traumas can be civic or private, but our relationship to them is always personal. “A city is nothing but streets and edifices teeming with memories,” Maddin stated cryptically.53 Memory’s accentuation of a few key moments is what feed mythologies of the self. While Maddin seems to be dealing only with his own very specific autobiography in the film, he is in fact creating a framework in which spectators can project their own autobiographical memories. In this way, My Winnipeg becomes Everyone’s Winnipeg.

Maddin can be surrealistic when he takes an iconic figure such as Manitoba’s official emblem, the bison, and comments on its sexual orientation or invents a taxi service that works only in back alleys or laws that govern sleepwalking. He wants to make us laugh at the mythic made absurd. And that potential for absurdity is not specific to Winnipeg. As Rick Groen wrote in the Globe and Mail, “Maddin’s absurdist Winnipeg could be any small city anywhere.”54 But it is Winnipeggers who stand to gain the most from Maddin’s hyperbolic mythologizing because they grew up with the official version of events and platitudinous public meanings attributed to both history and locales. Maddin’s turning the real St. Mary’s Academy for girls into a battlefield between uptight fathers and randy interlopers could be applied to all private girls’ schools, but it’s a specific Winnipeg lampoon. St. Mary’s Academy, whose public image is a pious refuge for virgins protected by black-clad nuns, is turned by Maddin into a fortress of libidinal repression. Those who attended the academy would have their own response to his outrageous claims, while those who knew it by reputation or identified it with other private girls’ schools in other cities would have their own fun.

My Winnipeg is a highly peculiar journey into what Rodney LaTourelle aptly calls “psychogeography.”55 This term suggests that the geographic mapping of what the mind’s eye sees is comparable to physical geography, that the
psychological embracing of the urban is as mythological as is the mythologizing of the land and nature in the nationalist-realist project of modernism. Maddin, as our guide into his memories, begins with home and the Mother and ends with the Winnipeg Arena and the Father, in which the destruction of the arena is equated with the death of the Father. The portal into another’s mindscape is meant to release the viewer’s own inner demons, the ones, Maddin claims, that viewers have been “too frightened to uncover for themselves.” Maddin uses both the production and the screening of his films as a form of collective and personal therapy. The script refers specifically to his making of a film within this film that is supposed to be a project that provides him with therapeutic results so that he can finally leave Winnipeg, where he has been “trapped” for half a century. “I really thought by making My Winnipeg I would cure myself of Winnipeg and be free to leave,” Maddin said in a Cineaction interview. Of course, he didn’t leave, since Winnipeg remains the locus of his creativity. He realized that his obsession with staying or leaving was misguided, that he could do both.

In “My (Other) Winnipeg: Excerpts from a Phantom Film,” an addendum to My Winnipeg published in Winnipeg’s cultural quarterly, Border Crossings, Maddin rehistoricizes the fantasies in My Winnipeg. “Strange is the role of memory in this city that no longer recollects why it’s even here,” he writes. “Even more strange is the way the city forgets its amnesias.” Again, Maddin uses the amnesia trope to offer himself as the archaeologist of memory: “We Winnipeggers visit the cityscapes of both worlds, the past and the present, which exist contemporaneously.” By adopting the royal “we” of urban identity, he is able to make the present look like the past and the past look like the present, which is precisely what memories do.

On March 6, 2010, Maddin appeared at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary to offer a live narration of My Winnipeg, as he had done in other cities, thereby performing his authorship publicly and using his presence to evoke authenticity. After the film, he held a Q&A in which he explained impishly that the documentary mode is highly subjective and that his film combines one-third myths, one-third wishful thinking, and one-third factoids. The fairy tale quality of his art conveys the spirit of a child’s bedtime story being read by a parent or relative. There may be “documentary” images interspersed in the film, but there are also clever cut-out animated re-creations of
historical events and absurdist redramatizations of nonexistent family events. As soon as the audience, who may not know Winnipeg, senses the game, they can enter the spirit of the film guiltlessly.

The film’s opening oracular pronouncements by the fictive Mrs. Maddin parallel the seer’s pronouncements in Saddest Music. Nothing can fool Mother; nothing can fool the seer. With a crooner singing “My Wonderful Winnipeg . . . Wonderful Winnipeg, where I belong” (My Winnipeg is highly musical, like its predecessor), Maddin establishes wonder as the basic element of his film. “It’s no Eden but it’s home sweet home to me,” the song continues. Cinematic Winnipeg becomes a wintery wonderland shot in Maddin’s proverbial “snow noire” style.60 Taking up the troika of “the forks, the lap, the furs” as the mantra of the city, he uses images of a naked female torso to represent the female genitalia of forks, lap, and fur. While The Forks is a tourist branding of the site where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers meet in the heart of the city, Maddin turns it into an erotic, earth-mother symbol, far from the trendy shops and fast-food outlets where people go for an escapist experience now. He goes “deeper” than the buildings’ original usage as railway warehouses, into the place’s Aboriginal past. The confluence of the two rivers, one flowing west to east and the other south to north, made the site a meeting place. It becomes the womb of Maddin’s originary fable, akin to the origins of Rome’s seven hills in a she-wolf and her cubs. The city is his mother. While the sleepy Maddin character tries to escape the city (his mother) in a nightmarish dream, he intones: “My mother. A force as strong as all the trains in Manitoba. As perennial as the winter. As ancient as the bison.” The pull between the powers of the eternal past (mother, winter, bison) and the power of the present (the train) is an uneven one. The past wins. Even the concept of escape by train is an anachronistic representation. It’s all past. Train travel via Winnipeg is an anachronistic exercise for the few who try it, a journey into nostalgia.

The past is represented in the family as a generational continuum. At ground level in the building that housed Lil’s Beauty Shop is the space for business, the site of the public persona. Above is the private space inhabited by Maddin’s nuclear family, while in the back is where Grandma and Aunt Lil live. Maddin calls his world a “gynocracy” because the women’s work and all the women who came for hair care were what penetrated his consciousness. His father was absent, working at the Winnipeg Arena, which served
as a male “home.” “Dreams are sweet,” the narrator pronounces. “Waking is bitter.” It was his mother and aunt who created dream-like beauty for their customers. They made life “sweet”—for a while, at least, until reality set in and another visit to the beauty salon was required. In the world of sweet dreams, Maddin identifies archetypal episodes of family history that he pretends to have acted out in his “family-film within a film.” The set he recreates of the family home includes his father buried under a rug in the living room, a presence that everyone can ignore. The psychodramas that he presents for the audience include an ingenious construction of an imaginary reality television show titled “LedgeMan,” where a ritual of suicide is threatened on a daily basis. This metaphor and cinematic homage to his teen brother's suicide signifies the importance of his death to the family, because the television show, we are told in the film, has played for fifty years.

Maddin undermines public discourse about the city’s moment on the world’s political stage (the General Strike of 1920) when he impishly injects a sexual content into the class struggle. He creates an ironic story of the bourgeois fathers of the daughters of St. Mary’s Academy manning the barricades of the school (rather than the more typical workers manning barricades) to prevent the Bolshevik rabble from defiling their daughters as they march by in protest. Maddin resurrections ancient terms like Bolshevik and bourgeoisie in his narrative to give the audience the flavour of class warfare but then deflects it into a Freudian scenario. His use of cut-out silhouettes in animated historical sequences expresses his view concerning the cartoonish character of most historical representation as two-dimensional and cardboard-like. These narratives have no depth of field, no perspective. Instead, they are mere verbal puppetry.

Maddin prefers to view reality as a struggle between two worlds—the psychic and the physical—with his preference being the psychic. He informs the viewer that there are actually four rivers that meet in Winnipeg rather than two. According to him, Aboriginal people believe that below The Forks (where the Red River meets the Assiniboine) lie two more rivers, which have a powerful magnetic force. This is meant to imply that Winnipeggers live in a universe with a paranormal dimension. Of course, in Maddin's Freudian lexicon, “the forks” refers to female genitalia. In his My Winnipeg volume, Maddin embraces the psychic Winnipeg as “Sweet, subconscious city!” What is subconscious
in Winnipeg’s historical waters is the confluence of two great cultural rivers: the Aboriginal, represented by one of the provincial legislature’s bison statues, which Maddin calls Broken Head, and the European immigrant, represented by the Golden Boy statue atop the legislature, which he claims, tongue-in-cheek, is a secret statue of the Greek god Hermes. Maddin is very clear that Aboriginal culture remains a powerful force in Winnipeg, even though historically it was displaced by Euro-Canadian culture.62

One of the finest absurdist digressions in the film is the narrator’s claim that the proliferation of female street names in the city happened because of the desire to acknowledge the names of the city’s more famous prostitutes. This claim is typical of Maddin’s endearing hyperbole and his belief that the city is fundamentally an erotic space. He also raises the city’s winter snow-drifts to a psychic level by describing them as “mazes of ectoplasm,” and he presents its back alleys as the true thoroughfares, with true signifying subconscious dreams. He calls this realm the “secret city” filled with the “illicit” and the “shameful.” One street, he claims, is a hermaphrodite because its front street and back lane are indistinguishable. All these quips filled with sexual innuendo turn Winnipeg into a city of transgressive desires. But as the early-twentieth-century psychologists liked to point out, eros (love) and thanatos (death) are cut from the same neurotic cloth. That is why Maddin’s cheeky erotic gloss on civic pride is balanced by his lamentation for the destruction (death) of the Winnipeg Arena and its replacement by the MTS Centre, where long ago the mighty Eaton’s department store dominated the city’s retail trade.63

Maddin’s voice rises to a pitch of indignation and disgust as he denounces the new arena as a “zombie in a cheap suit.” He then proceeds to engage in a homoerotic description of the life in the holy cathedral of hockey, his father’s Winnipeg Arena. “Urine. Breast milk. Sweat. The hockey cathedral’s holy trinity of odours,” the narrator intones, reminding us that hockey is sacred, a religious rite. This trinity seems to be the male animus of the earlier “forks, the lap, the furs” incantation that he associates with the female anima. “Now my building lies like a heart ripped open in the snow, closed to the public that worshipped in it,” he laments. No wonder the home associated with the mother exists and so the Mother has to be personified as alive, while the arena has disappeared along with the father.
This conjunction of homoeroticism, religion, and sports in a secular temple providing pagan ecstasy is followed by his story of a kinky Golden Boy swimsuit contest, supposedly held in The Bay’s well-known Paddlewheel restaurant and judged by a leering mayor, and the story of the multi-tiered Sherbrooke Swimming Pool, whose lowest level was occupied by boys engaged in nude frolic. Maddin tells us that this is the world of subterranean desires (in Jungian theory, water is a symbol of unconscious desires), the world of the pool beneath the pool beneath the pool, whose waters came from “the forks.” This symbolism is meant in good fun, but it also alludes to the private nature of the mind and the worlds hidden behind the thousands of closed doors that make up a city’s residences and enterprises.

Maddin ends the film on a sardonic note when he invokes a supposed Aboriginal Happyland, a tent city of the dispossessed and the homeless occupying the rooftops of office towers (outdoor penthouses, one might call them). He resurrects the iconic teepee of the presettlement era as a symbol of an earlier history, but at the level of carnival, similar to the First Nations encampment at the annual Calgary Stampede, where nineteenth-century costuming is de rigueur. And he is also happy to announce a comic-book heroine, one Citizen Girl, as the “what if” saviour of the city. He describes her as “a concerned comrade” who will right all the evil done throughout the city’s history: restore the Eaton’s store, resurrect the Winnipeg Arena, and so on. She would be the city’s new lap, providing true succour—security, caring, and loving—which his mother’s lap (the old Winnipeg) never did. As a final word to the viewer, Maddin as narrator (and script writer) reminds us that Winnipeg’s (and his own) sleepiness is aligned with the psychoanalyst’s couch. “Lying on the couch,” he tells us, means an offering of fabulous imagery, where we narrate our dreams. He wants the audience to play at being psychiatrists trying to explain the meaning of scenes such as his late brother and mother lying together cuddled in the snow, one of the few times in which Mother exhibits caring. Maddin wants us to accept that there is a necrophilial attraction to what is long gone, to people who have passed away like certain buildings that have been torn down. His grand conceit is that laying his traumas down for psychotherapy is also a form of civic therapy. By “exposing” certain truths that he has fantasized, he thinks he can purge himself and other Winnipeggers of the city’s hold. William Beard, in his magisterial study of Maddin’s work,
claims that the city of My Winnipeg is completely a figment of Maddin’s imagination, existing “only in fantasy,” while at the same time the film produces “titters of recognition in local audiences.”

Creating the Mythological City

Under Maddin’s direction, Winnipeg is reconstituted as a fabled entity, a city rich in fantastic stories that grow forest-like out of its nutrient-rich gumbo. When Maddin fables his city with surreal explanations, he removes it from the temporal zone and gives it an aura of timelessness. The archetypal figures of Mother, Father, Son, and so on are part of that timelessness. He casts these figures in a postmodern light through symbolic associations. For example, with the absurd television soap opera “LedgeMan,” he evokes the symbolic power of ledges and suicides in our culture and so slips in the real suicide of his brother over a failed love affair. Another aspect of fable is its approximation to dream-like states, which can be either drawn out or fleeting, and we have no real way of gauging the duration of a dream except through emotional impact. The passage or sense of time in a dream is tied to emotions, whose intensities are not mechanical or regular like the divisions of a clock.

The city of transgressive desires visualizes space in a different way. The contrast of black and white and the duality of two-colour inserts shift the visual experience of urban space. Just as Maddin shrinks and expands time at will in the film, he also shrinks and expands space beyond any physical or historical reference points. Like the spaces portrayed in dreams, the spaces of his fantasy city are difficult to fit into a strict physical representation. Maddin’s Winnipeg is more suggestive and evocative of mental perceptions than sensory ones. In My Winnipeg, the train window that frames the Maddin character is the visual equivalent of cinema. The fuzzy background scenes that he imports into this frame are meant to emulate the borders of the film viewer and the dreamer.

Maddin makes much of Winnipeg as a maternal lap that cradles him. That the lap is very much an Anglo-Canadian one ignores the importance of seminal figures like the Métis leader Louis Riel and the important role of the francophone community of St. Boniface in the city’s identity. A symbolic example of this omission is the “third” river in Winnipeg, which is the creek-like Seine that
flows through St. Boniface and empties into the Red River near The Forks. Like the French fact in Winnipeg, it is forgotten in Maddin’s city. Likewise, Louis Riel, the father of Manitoba, whose remains were buried on the grounds of St. Boniface Cathedral, does not make it into the mythology of the city since it became a city only after the famous rebellion. The whole Métis heritage of the place is passed over: Maddin seems unable to fantasize the Métis fact into a transgressive desire.

In both Saddest Music and My Winnipeg, the old man, the father figure, is present. The male trajectory from youth to old age is core to Maddin’s narratives. He is highly conscious of how generations impinge on each other and how each generation struggles to free itself from the regime under which it was raised. The sibling rivalry and the father-son conflicts over women depicted in Saddest Music express part of his stance toward the parental generation. Maddin is forever the son and never the father. This approach fits the psychoanalytic categories concerning dreams and fantasies that he favours and explains why he considers My Winnipeg, along with the other two autobiographical films (Cowards Bend the Knee and Brand upon the Brain), therapeutic.

What marks Winnipeg as a city of transgressive desires is the importance of psychohistoric and psychogeographic elements to his storytelling. When Maddin metamorphosizes poor Roderick Kent into the Serbian cellist “Gavrilo the Great,” he consciously adopts the first name of the 1915 assassin of Archduke Ferdinand, whose murder sparked World War I. Serbia became a victim of that war, much like it did under the American-led NATO bombing of 2000 over Kosovo; Maddin comically acknowledges the latter event through Roderick’s triumph over his American brother. Maddin gleefully transfers historically important events into a sexual paradigm, whether it be the two brothers in Saddest Music or the Winnipeg General Strike of 1920 in My Winnipeg, which becomes a metaphoric front line between the libido (the workers) and the superego (the bourgeoisie).

Likewise, the psychogeographic is highlighted in the imagined forks beneath the forks of Winnipeg’s two rivers. Maddin uses this fictional claim to create a vast pseudohistorical apparatus of events, whose casual factors are linked to the paranormal spirit world. The city is haunted by its transgressions, be they sexual, like the naming of streets after prominent prostitutes, or historical, like the destruction of venerated buildings such as Eaton’s or...
the Winnipeg Arena. While it would be easy to conclude that it is the archaic film genre that distinguishes Maddin’s films, however, I would argue that it is his excavation of the rich humus of psychoanalytic ideology that is the prime mover in his films. In this, his films are reminiscent of Lauzon’s _Léolo_ and its coming-of-age narrative. But Maddin goes further than Lauzon by making transgressive desires and the dream world a general part of urban life—attributing desire to buildings and rivers, giving the city a certain convulsive life, dominated by sorrow for past sins. Maddin’s city is a figment of twisted dreams and convoluted memories. That is why his city, unlike Lauzon’s Montréal, is created on a set.

Umberto Eco describes humanity as “playful creatures” who are more interested in amusement than truth. This sense of play is Maddin’s forte as he ties personal and public histories into a psychosexual knot, creating a psychological carnival where the serious, the sensual, and the comic become one big dreamscape. His urban cosmology gathers meaning from a mix of Jung and Freud, Greco-Roman mythology, and Aboriginal creation myths, wrapped up in a Marx Brothers pastiche of slapstick silliness. This is the secret at the heart of the heart of the continent that he calls “Winnipeg.” Winnipeg, as the home of transgression and immorality, is the archetypal “Sin City.” In this, it is no different from the attribution of debauchery to cities since the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah was posited as the opposite of the sacred city of Jerusalem. When Maddin turns a hockey arena into a temple of manliness in the Greco-Roman sense, he likens the tearing down of the arena to “blasphemy.” His passionate lifting of the secular to the sacred by using such descriptors as “temple” is his game of reinvesting identities with their opposite character. His invention of faux-historical truths by deconstructing the fallacies of conventional historical storytelling is a technique befitting the archaeologist of Winnipeg’s arcane facts. The only truths that matter are fabulous ones. The label he created for the film, “docu-fantasy,” reflects the two polarities that he bridges. The incorporation of documentary claims and documentary footage into the film to make it seem a valid history is a device that only highlights his re-creation of Winnipeg as a city with a perverted past, filled with libidinal desires.

Maddin’s closest colleague in this self-styled docu-fantasy genre is Gary Burns of Calgary, who, like Maddin, has both fictionalized and documentarized his maternal home. Burns is the master of the faux documentary, or what was
earlier called the “mockumentary.” While he cannot draw on the historical richness of an older urban identity that Maddin exploits so convincingly, the Calgary that he presents in his films becomes the epitome of superficiality and suburban blandness. Where Maddin revels in the gloom of his Freudian pronouncements and digressions, Burns plays a lighter satirical tune. And where Maddin delights in the shadowy world of black-and-white film cinematography, which represents artful construction because we naturally see in colour, Burns prefers to shoot his urban imagery in off-colour tints reminiscent of comic books. These differences aside, the two auteurs are conjoined by their having lived in their respective cities since birth, allowing them to mirror their cities with an imaginative authenticity. Their cities are imaginary urbanscapes rooted in authorial subjectivity.