**Fritters and Jitters – The Proper Analysis of a Guy Maddin Artifact**

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            In the Autumn of 2013, I found myself outside an office at Innis College, waiting for a sessional instructor who was new to the Cinema Studies program at the University of Toronto. This particular sessional instructor happened to be world-renowned Canadian filmmaker - Guy Maddin, who had been invited to teach a course to undergraduate students that term. I was lucky enough to still be at the college, having been enrolled in the Masters degree program that year. It seemed prudent to introduce myself to Guy, considering my own goals of becoming a director and screenwriter. Guy has achieved most of his career goals by now, having nearly a dozen feature-length films to his credit, as well as dozens of avant-garde short films. He is currently working on a cutting-edge project and, like most of his work, it is difficult to describe, but in short Seances could be defined as a multi-media, interactive, aleatoric art installation focused on ‘re-producing’ lost films. The project seems both ominous and elusive – a paradox befitting this auteur’s oeuvre.

            At that office door I knocked, despite having a keyhole-like glimpse into the activities inside. With the door being slightly ajar, I noticed Guy was gently pacing in the office muttering some of his introductory comments for an upcoming lecture. In fact, this lecture was to be presented to the graduate students and faculty of the Cinema Studies program. It was a good opportunity to introduce myself and Guy seemed happy to receive me. We chatted for at least ten minutes – mainly about Jean Renoir (“the actor’s director”) and later about performances, generally. Guy told a very funny joke about having crafted a costume to become a human-rose-bouquet and then being challenged by a belligerent goon outside the bar where he was reveling for the night. Needless to say, Guy effectively became a thorn in the goon’s side. I can’t remember how the event played out but I was happy to hear that Guy was a confident and outgoing rabble rouser. In fact, most of the biographies on Maddin seem to miss that point focusing instead on his rather secluded childhood and geographical coordinates in the ice fields of Winnipeg, Manitoba. I suppose this ‘remoteness’ is an angle conducive to publication and readership, but Guy is far too multi-dimensional to be fixed to singular descriptors or locations. Like his films, Guy too is paradoxical in nature – outgoing and reclusive, predictable and experimental.

            I established a strong rapport with Guy that day, and although few would describe me as reclusive, it could be said that Guy and I have a lot in common. I continued to communicate with Guy after his stay in Toronto. We sent emails back and forth – I sent him a book recommendation that seemed to please him a great deal. In the spirit of the book and the exchange, perhaps the book’s title should remain a mystery. I also sent him a link to my own edited, found-footage films. He provided a glowing review for my Orson Welles tribute video, deeming it truly original; this was high praise when one takes into account his own accomplishments as a film editor. I asked whether I could use his remarks for festival submissions and he agreed. It was months later that I decided to follow-up with Guy and see where our relationship stood. Not to sound disingenuous in the slightest, but it is a rare opportunity when a historical figure of cinema provides you with a nascent friendship. I wanted to see those buds bloom.

            Guy was accommodating to that end and remained amiable to continuing communication with me. I wrote to him requesting any documents that he might have that could help me with a paper I was going to be working on for completing my graduate degree. Promptly, Guy sent back an email with six attachments! The first document was a first transcription from his documentary film, My Winnipeg (2007). The document was riddled with polychromatic highlights marking errors, omissions and alterations. The next four documents were related to Guy’s most recent feature-length production, Keyhole (2011). The package included a 96-page screenplay, a short document distilling the fever-dream essence of the film, a slightly longer revised script and finally, a 17-page treatment for the film dated from 2009 and so riddled with polychromatic highlights that sans-legend, intuition would seem to explain that each story chapter is distinguished through a new highlighted colour. The final document was most interesting to me both for the straightforwardness of its presentation and its historical relevance. The 24-page treatment for the feature-length work - Brand Upon the Brain! A Remembrance in 12 Chapters (2006) had a minimum of revisions, all marked in red font. Considering that Brand Upon the Brain was one of my favourite Guy Maddin films, I elected it the most logical document to analyze.

            Guy Maddin is recognized as one of the most enigmatic filmmakers working today and is often compared (ironically, in reductive terms) to Luis Bunuel and David Lynch. Maddin’s films are complex and expound the affective dimensions of surrealism in terms that are not yet well-rehearsed academically. Comparisons of Maddin to other filmmakers will always be found wanting. That being said, his films do evoke the photogenic energy of Abel Gance and Maddin has also made remarks that he was guided early on by Josef von Sternberg. There is a cornucopia of inspiration ever-present in Maddin’s oeuvre. Once this encyclopedic referential quality of Maddin’s films is accepted on its own terms, the notion of categorizing his work as kitsch or camp becomes absurd. Maddin is a mad scientist in the cinematic laboratory (a Docteur Tube, if you will), always working in experimental stages, always inventing – always theorizing. For Maddin, nothing is complete and his work will always be haunted by the ghosts of what-might-have-been – the experimental failures that never were because a formula was achieved and the trials moved on. The absurd of Guy Maddin’s work lies in the fact that what is presented could have been presented a thousand different ways. The tension of Maddin presenting merely one way is played out through juxtapositions in the narrative and editing giving rise to a sense of absurdity. The absurd is an affective reaction by audiences who must disavow experiencing a Maddin film as the myriad of narratives that it really is. Arguably, this is the play of Maddin – to toy with our narrative conventions in storytelling and tweak our consciousness so that we might see more like an omnipotent deity – or that we might simply truly see and understand as something or someone other than ourselves. Maddin’s work propels us into the impossible and tries to hold us there until it is too uncomfortable to bear any longer. Maddin is the Master of the Abstract.

            It would be fair to put forward that the proper analysis of a Guy Maddin document - even the most straightforward kind - requires a thorough knowledge of his oeuvre. I would like to suggest starting the analysis of this 24-page treatment with a broader survey of Maddin’s cinematic work in order to identify the quality of Maddin’s textual abstractness, more generally. Maddin is promiscuous in drawing from sources for inspiration; however, he has also forged his own path (part of his personal dilemma), and as one might expect, his oeuvre does display the signs of stages of development. The first stage in Maddin’s cinematic work is from 1985-1996 and is best described as emulating cinematic ‘primitivism’ with a focus on intellectual montage. Twilight of the Ice Nymphs (1997) represents a rupture in Maddin’s development and the next two stages of his film career are firstly a rejection of the lessons from this production followed by the incorporation of the lessons. From 1997-2002 (the second stage of development), Maddin rejected the tenets of commercial filmmaking and became more entrenched in esoteric modes of expression. The third stage of development is from 2003-2011 where Maddin accepts some of the benefits of high production value which are then incorporated into his system. The development has stages but it is also indicative of the formation of a unique system of expression and meaning – a particular stylistic system. I would suggest that Maddin has developed a ‘feedback’ system functioning through a unique dialectic. The system is supported by ‘loopy’ narratives and a ‘kaleidoscope’ aesthetic. I will take a moment to define my terms before moving on to demonstrating the operations of this feedback system in Maddin’s work.

Guy Maddin’s cinematic work relies on loopy narratives that can be understood through three senses of the word, ‘loopy’ – crafty/witty, confusing/confounding, repetitive/circular. The craftiness can be seen in My Winnipeg, where Ann Savage is presented as both a biographical Mother-figure as well as an auto-biographical cinematic-Matriarch, or is present in the short film, My Dad is 100 Years Old (2005) where Isabella Rossellini presents a polyvisual/polyvocal cast of historical cinematic figures whose historical imagination are themselves spewed out by the pregnant belly of a Cronos-like cinematic-Patriarch (an imaginary construct in itself). This loopy craftiness flattens the expression of characterization in the narrative until the one-dimensionality seems impossible, thus giving rise to a sense of the uncanny – a mirroring that evokes the abyss. Any one of Maddin’s films has been noted for its confusing narratives, either formed through the discombobulated motivation of amnesiac characters in Archangel (1990), or through the quasi-auto-biographical elements of Cowards Bend the Knee (2003) and the dissociation of earthly and ghostly orgiastic delights in Keyhole. This dissociative quality of loopiness in the narratives of Maddin’s work also promotes a sense of deja-vu or mise-en-abyme as characters can never quite get their bearing within the diegesis and seem to suffer like a Wildebeest, spinning uncontrollably from a lack of ear irrigation. In the third sense of ‘loopy’, Maddin’s work consistently displays narrative progression that is both repetitive and circular, whether it is the slapping fit in Sissy-Boy Slap-Party (1995), the conga line in Nude Caboose (2006), the tactile hand-shaking in Cowards Bend the Knee or the erotic Sapphic interludes in Brand upon the Brain! Although, the loopy narratives of Maddin’s work are both unique and share qualities, they all give rise to a sense of mise-en-abyme primarily through the flattening of representation and identification. This paradox arising from multi-representation through repetition and circularity helps to define the Maddin feedback system. It is also worth noting that Maddin narratives have often been developed through his partnership with screenwriter, George Toles.

The other primary component of the Maddin feedback system is the kaleidoscope aesthetic. This aesthetic system is formed through specific elements of the mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing. Maddin has always created fantastical dreamlike settings for his films which seem to have shifting patterns (much like the kaleidoscope). This is largely the reason why most critics have overlooked Maddin’s affinity for French Impressionism and instead claimed him as a sort of neo-German Expressionist. This kaleidoscopic mise-en-scene is constructed for black-and-white and also for colour (Twilight of the Ice Nymphs) films and involves different shapes and textures existing within a deep staged set design. The kaleidoscopic effect is heightened through soft focus cinematography, and framing is often manipulated through the use of mattes. As a result, Maddin’s oeuvre includes a near-endless set of visual patterns. It is worth nothing that Maddin’s auditory system is a different animal as it were, but seems to demonstrate many of the qualities of the visual system and would likely be fit for inclusion in the feedback system. Perhaps, the most astounding element of a Guy Maddin film is the editing, which has the playful, frenetic energy of an Abel Gance rapid-edit montage sequence with the aggressive, intellectually-stimulating juxtapositions of Eisensteinian montage of attractions. A single frame of a Maddin shot is itself richly patterned; however, through his rapid montage editing, these patterns proliferate and produce texts pregnant with hidden meanings. These hidden meanings are revealed as the patterns shift, much like how a kaleidoscope reveals its source material as the frames of glass are rotated and manipulated to produce a variety of vantage points by which to understand what is seen.

The loopy narratives and kaleidoscope aesthetic of Maddin’s cinematic work form the backbone and governing logic of his stylistic system – a feedback system. The term ‘feedback’ here refers to a unique kind of dialectic and one with circular progression instead of linear or incremental progression of ideas and meaning. Instead of a dialectic that creates a new idea through the synthesis of a thesis and antithesis, Maddin’s feedback system constructs a dialectic that has thesis and thesis – complements to each other. The result of this complementary relationship is that there is no synthesis per se, but instead the juxtaposition suggests that the new idea must be formed by returning continually to the source theses. The result is a pronounced sense of mise-en-abyme where the new idea is ghostly, existing only in the imaginary register and oneiric in its articulation. There is the potential for infinite theses in the dialectic chain, including a repetition of theses. This mise-en-abyme arising from repetition and circularity, evokes the concept of death and ghostliness as the chain neither extends nor has a single link, but instead links are superimposed on each other ad infinitum. To disavow this ghostly chain of ideas and meaning promotes a sense of schizophrenic energy in Maddin’s work. The disavowal is in fact necessary because although the feedback system is built on a ghostly, mise-en-abyme progression of ideas and meaning, his work has a concrete spatiotemporal form. The film plays, we watch and may re-watch, but an ending for a Maddin film seems moot. That there is an ending makes us aware of a sense of schizophrenia for the text – an ending is imposed but is a non-sequitur for the narrative structure. Finitude is oblivion within Maddin’s work yet it exists at the end of each reel.

If this prolegomenon on the governing logic of the Maddin stylistic system is accepted, then it may be possible to apply the theories therein to an analysis of the 24-page treatment for Brand Upon the Brain!. However, Brand must also be fit into the development of Maddin’s oeuvre. I have suggested that there have been three stages to Maddin’s cinematic work, with a possible fourth stage currently in progress through Maddin’s multi-media, installation artwork. The first stage of development (1985-1996) is marked by a strong impulse to emulate cinematic ‘primitivism’ – although the term gets thrown around when describing Maddin’s work, it could be taken for granted that it refers to the extended use of soft focus cinematography, iris mattes, intertitle cards, rapid-edit montage sequences, rapid intercutting juxtaposing the actions of two characters, use of old film stock, use of vintage cameras, lack of dialogue, tinting and toning, intentional colour fading effects and Expressionist set designs. Actors’ performances, use of sound and narrative themes in Maddin’s films also harken back to filmmaking of the early cinema and silent cinema eras. Maddin’s first film was a short titled, The Dead Father (1985) and it opens with a credit sequence that features emblematic close shots of the cast of characters. This device sets the stage for what Maddin was trying to do in emulating the late silent and early sound era of Hollywood filmmaking. However, the Oedipal themes played out through acts of necrophilic cannibalism are a far cry from the sensibilities of any Hollywood picture then or now. Maddin also uses sound bridges to create ambiguity on audio sources in a manner that is avant-garde and would only be construed as a mistake in an early sound film produced in Hollywood.

Maddin’s first feature film was Tales from the Gimli Hospital (1988) and again, the film employed opening credits and intertitles in a manner that recalls the early cinema era. Surreal elements such as a looping broken record and intellectual montage sequences with quasi-erotic themes recall the avant-garde European filmmaking of the 1920s. Archangel (1990) mixes postmodern psychoanalytic themes of cannibalism and amnesia within a post-WWI setting. Sternbergian polyvocal systems play a major role in this second Maddin feature. Careful (1992) uses extensive tinting/toning, expressionist high- and oblique angled shots, tableaux staging and closely framed intellectual montage sequences in an manner that recalls Abel Gance and the elements of *photogenie* so important to the French Impressionist filmmakers. In 1995, Maddin produced two short films which began to distill the most important elements of this first stage of development in his career. Odilon Redon is a meticulously engineered homage to the Industrial Age and all that it wrought for and against society. Maddin ‘channels’ the energy of Gance while threading Oedipal themes with Shakespearean King Lear and Wilde’s Salome. Maddin is now distilling the influence of specific movements of early avant-garde filmmaking to focus the piece – in this case it is German Expressionism which guides the construction of the mise-en-scene while Gancian Impressionism creates a structure for the editing scheme. Sissy-Boy Slap-Party plays like a perfect antithetical complement to Kenneth Anger’s KKK (1965), where frantic and frenetic rapid-edit montage creates looping effects that recall the Austrian filmmaker - Martin Arnold. The film is less a mockery of homoeroticism than a subtle and subverted attempt to show that values exists within generations and are perverted by subsequent generations that learn from those values. By 1997, Maddin was given his first shot at producing a commercial film - Twilight of the Ice Nymphs (1997). Given a moderate budget, Maddin was able to enlist some veteran acting talent. However, the three-way relationship between Maddin, Toles (the screenwriter) and Alliance Atlantis (the producers) proved unworkable. Maddin took the lessons and buried them deep.

For the next four years, Maddin worked on short films, with his most potent piece being the much-loved homage to Soviet Constructivism, The Heart of the World (2000). Vertovian editing, Eisensteinian intellectual montage, Constructivist mise-en-scene and Meyerholdian biomechanical performance locate the film in a specific historical moment. Although, Maddin was now focusing his inspirational material instead of creating a soup, the themes had shifted from playful Oedipal ones to apocalyptic strife. The film’s message seems clear – we choose and wield the power of decision, but when we choose, something is left behind and lost or if we refuse to choose then there is no progress and we meet an end. Therefore, our choices lie between a void and a terminus. Two other new themes emerge in this second stage of development (one which could be described as ‘repressed’) – vampiric themes present in Hospital Fragment (2000) and then finding their full expression in Dracula – Pages from a Virgin’s Diary (2002), as well as, pointed jabs at bourgeois guilt and that class’s degenerate fantasies. This second stage of development saw a repression of inspiration and a concentration on particular themes. In 2003, Maddin began to express through his own voice, fully confident that his message required a minimal channeling of inspirational sources.

The third stage of development in Maddin’s career begins his efforts in mixing auto-biography with fictional fantasy and melodrama. Having been forced to film on 35mm in Twilight and coming to accept the shift to digital, Maddin also moved forward and began entertaining new modes of expressions and new methods of achieving them through the filmic medium. The films of this third stage replace the absurd with a more personal humour – Maddin is now able to laugh at himself instead of mock the ways of others and the ways of the world. The films feel more personal. In Cowards Bend the Knee (2003) the use of full-frontal male nudity becomes a surrogate cameo for Maddin’s shame. Psychoanalytic themes are more pointed and potent, such as when a primal scene literally has a baby placed on a bed during a sex act (presumably the parents) and an odd incestuous surrogacy with a transplanted hand recalls Lacan’s *lamella*. The films of this stage of development have a marked sense of tactility as if Maddin wants to reach into the film and grasp the diegetic world before remaking it and reaching out to pull us into it. This is the stage where Maddin becomes a true auteur. Maddin now turns to John Gurdebeke for editing duties on most of his films and where it was once difficult to pin down the influence of Toles, a third set of hands is added to the creation process. Maddin still relies on loopy narratives and a kaleidoscope aesthetic throughout his work, but as auto-biographical elements become incorporated into the films, other inspirations begin to receive more careful treatment and employment. A desire to capture the dreaminess of the past in his early work is replaced by blunt nightmare. The effect of this shift is that there is greater legibility to each shot. I would suggest that it wasn’t a desire to become more commercial that rendered Maddin films progressively more comprehensible and legible, but instead a jaded attitudinal shift from bitter idealism to guarded repression and then humble acceptance. As they say, “the truth shall set you free” and to quote Tyler Durden(!) “it is only when we have lost everything that we are free to do anything”. Maddin’s use of autobiographical material for his films in this third stage of development provided a cathartic release where history could be redefined for him in more personal terms. The filmic medium could channel him instead of Maddin having to use it to channel others. His films became more honest and more legible, even if the narratives remain rather incomprehensible.

With a moderate understanding of both the Maddin stylistic system and oeuvre, it seems that a proper analysis of a Maddin historical document may be possible. I suggested this rather lengthy preamble because it seems prudent to suggest that a document produced in a particular historical moment should fit neatly into a broader historical context. The analysis of the Brand treatment may still be inaccurate given that there is no historical recording of all of Maddin’s thoughts, actions and movements by which to fully integrate the document and understand it. However, a fuller understanding of his cinematic work should provide some powerful tools for a proper analysis, all things being considered equal. The treatment is in black font, but red font is used to highlight “additions and changes” and is clearly stated just under the title. The first change is altering the year of the flashback sequences to 1900 (although, there is no indication of what the original choice here was). The next alteration is to change the protagonist’s age to 40. It would seem that the first alteration of historical date is coordinated to match with the second alteration of protagonist’s age. This is interesting to note, because although Brand has a rather remote and bucolic seaside setting where decades of the late-19th- early-20th century would be difficult to distinguish (there are no cars in the film, for example), clearly the choice of changing the protagonist’s age can also alter many aspects of the mise-en-scene in a film.

The next alteration appears to be an additional passage created to demonstrate the sinister routines of the mother-figure juxtaposed with the toil suffered by the protagonist. Perhaps, this passage fills in some character motivation. Noteworthy, is the fact that in this early treatment, the protagonist’s name is still ‘Bruno’ (likely inspired by Bruno Schultz, whom Maddin was quite keen on reading). Maddin later changed the protagonist’s name to ‘Guy’ in the spirit of honest autobiography (which in Maddin’s terms is about being 97% true). The next addition is two intertitle cards that would appear to be inspired by a source material unknown to me. It could be suggested that the intertitles serve to focus the narrative progression and maintain what I noted earlier as a shift toward greater legibility in Maddin’s films during this third stage of development. Some other additions follow which appear to add dimensions to the Guy-Bruno character, while the other additions continue to add insidiousness to the villain character of mother Odetta. The vagueness of character development and motivation in the first stage of development in Maddin’s work is now finding clarification in his third stage – greater polarity leads to greater legibility. Interestingly, there are also additions for the development of the detective story sub-plot involving the character, ‘Chance’. Based on these additions, there must be a more revised treatment of the film in existence. Maddin at some point must have chosen to make the detective story sub-plot more mysterious by again altering some of Chance’s expository actions and transferring them to Odetta. The effects of this choice are two-fold: greater polarization of good and evil in characterization and an emphasis on identification with the queer character of Chance. Overall, many of the alterations marked in this document seem to attempt to have Bruno’s storyline coordinate more clearly with that of Chance. This must have later been deserted, and I would suggest rightfully so, because the separation of Bruno-Guy from Chance provides the sense of isolation integral to realizing that Bruno-Guy lacks motivation because of loneliness and a lack of kinship. In addition, separating the two main characters and their quests has the effect of creating a sense of spiraling which is extremely apt given the milieu of a seaside lighthouse whose height and light truly represent depth and darkness. Although the alterations are difficult to analyze and understand, based on them being clearly marked and with the final film product as a reference, it is possible to trace some of the important developments in Brand Upon the Brain!.

This analysis of the document would seem to indicate that even ambiguous alterations still strongly suggest directions and intentions in development when cross-referenced with other relatable textual material. The document on its own would not provide much, if any, information on the significance of alterations but through cross-referencing with the produced film and with understanding and knowledge of the development of Maddin’s oeuvre and stylistic system, useless information becomes extremely relevant. The 24-page treatment for Brand would appear to verify some of the elements of Maddin’s development as a filmmaker, primarily a shift toward greater legibility in the third stage (or autobiographical stage) of his cinematic work.