

Far from the Maddin crowd

THIRTY YEARS OF THE WINNIPEG FILM GROUP

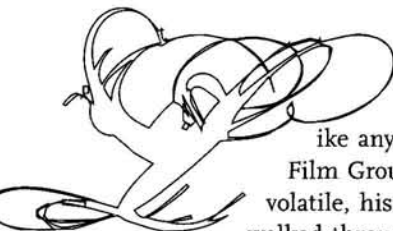
by K. GEORGE GODWIN

for a particular type of filmmaking—"the prairie post-modern"—the idea of a house style presupposes a top down creative direction. But the Film Group is far from being a studio in the traditional sense; it could more accurately be described as a studio in the traditional sense, a facilitator of sorts, a provider of infrastructure. The illusion of a coherent identity is based on the work of a handful of "stars"—most significantly John Paizs in the early to mid-80s and Guy Maddin in subsequent years. But these were only two among many.

In December, 1974, the Film Group was incorporated, thanks to financial assistance from the Canada Council, as a non-profit organization. This was just ten months after the Canadian Film Symposium II at the University of Manitoba resulted in the "Winnipeg Manifesto," which began:

We, the undersigned filmmakers and filmworkers wish to voice our belief that the present system of film production/distribution/exhibition works to the extreme disadvantage of the Canadian filmmaker and film audience. We wish to state unequivocally that film is an expression and affirmation of the cultural reality of this country first, and a business second.

Signed by a wide variety of people, including Denys Arcand, Colin Low, and Don Shebib, the manifesto concluded with a call to all levels of government to establish public funding for the production and exhibition of Canadian films. That year also saw the opening of the National Film Board's regional offices in Halifax, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver, and the formation of other co-ops across the country. The Film Group was clearly a product of its time, established by a group of local filmmakers who wanted to have the collective means to make films that were rooted in their own community.



Like any arts organization, the Winnipeg Film Group has had a convoluted, at times volatile, history. In the 15 years since I first walked through the Film Group's doors, there have been, if memory serves, six executive directors, six distribution coordinators, and numerous production and training coordinators; the only constant has been programmer Dave Barber at the Cinematheque. There have been boards with grandiose schemes which plunged the Group into deficit; miraculous turnarounds through diligent and responsible management; a board which inexplicably tried to cut loose the Cinematheque (the Group's crown jewel, and the only department which actually brings in money); and other boards which have struggled to keep production resources in line with evolving technologies. But ultimately, the politics and economics of the organization barely matter. What makes the Film Group worthy of attention at all are the works, both monumental and mediocre, which have been produced by the constantly changing membership.

For most members, past and present, the Film Group is first and foremost a training ground. People come in, participate for a while, and then depart. Few have stayed on to build continuous bodies of work within the organization. The majority of productions have been first or second films, with their makers then moving on—some to various crew positions in the industry, with others, having tasted the experience and finding it not to their liking, on to other things. Virtually all of the founding members established careers in the commercial industry—as producers, directors, editors, sound and camera technicians—progressing from "amateur" enthusiast to working professional. Although the Film Group has acquired a reputation

What set the Film Group apart from other Canadian co-ops was the creation in 1983 of the Cinematheque, its own exhibition venue. Initially, Dave Barber, the theatre's programmer since its inception, screened works both local and from other parts of the country at the NFB's Cinema Main. In 1986, with the Film Group's move into the newly established Artspace Building in Winnipeg's Old Market area, a dedicated theatre was built, whose primary mandate was and still is the screening of Manitoban and Canadian films, supported by a choice selection of features and documentaries from around the world. The existence of this theatre has meant that Film Group members have access to the means of production; they also have had, for two decades, a guarantee of public exhibition.

In what might be considered the Film Group's First Age, production consisted mostly of short documentaries and animation. The inaugural production, a group effort directed by Alan Kroeker, was a minor, unambitious comedy called *Rabbit Pie*, 1976. In the half decade that followed, Paizs (*Hoe Down*, 1977; *The Dreamer*, 1978), Alan Pakarnyk (*Daydream*, 1979), and Ed Ackerman (*Sarah's Dream*, 1980; *Primiti Too Taa*, 1987) worked in a number of animation styles, while Elise Swerhone (*Havakeen Lunch*, 1979), Barry Lank (*It's a Hobby for Harvey*, 1980), and others created small-scale documentaries on local subjects.

This period also marked Paizs' emergence, after three animated shorts, as the Film Group's first auteur. Following the juvenile excesses of *Highway 61 Revisited* (1979), and the learning-curve efforts *Ed Zorax @ the Future City* and *The Obsession of Billy Botski* (both 1980), he emerged in 1983 with his most impressive work, *The Three Worlds of Nick* trilogy, in which he explored a number of styles. The faux travelogue *Springtime in Greenland*, which treats the rituals of suburbia like some distant and exotic culture, *Oak, Ivy & Other Dead*

Elms (in which Paizs' character gets embroiled in dirty politics at an exclusive private school), and the implausibly colourful spy tale *The International Style* (Nick tries to recover a top secret microchip from an unscrupulous industrialist). Here, single-handedly, Paizs established the image which has coloured perceptions of the Film Group ever since. Geoff Pevere, who encountered Paizs' work (*Botski*, *Springtime*, and *Style*) for the first time at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1984, has said that if it was not "the best Canadian film program I'd ever seen, it felt like something close to it." He went on to say that these films were "obviously the product of someone who'd spent an unholy amount of time watching movies and tv and listening to top-40 radio," of someone who inhabited "a place where imported media products were both inescapable and irresistible." While Paizs made these particular, peculiar films, others continued with more conventional, socially engaged documentary work: Victor Dobchuk's *So Far From Home* (1982, about exiled Chilean folk singer Hugo Torres), Rysard Hunka's *Bread & Freedom* (1983, about Poland's Solidarity movement), Jancarlo Markiw's *Carlo* (1983), Leon Johnson's *You Laugh Like a Duck* (1980) and *Le Metif Enrage* (1983), and John Paskievich and Mike Mirus' *The Price of Daily Bread* (1985).

The initial success of Paizs' comedies ushered in the Film Group's Second Age, the varied and prolific latter half of the 80s. The shadow cast by Paizs was long but also inspiring, influencing other filmmakers (Lorne Bailey's very funny *The Milkman Cometh* [1988] is Paizsian in its use of industrial film form), and creating a taste among critics and viewers for more of this "postmodernist" cinema. They didn't have to wait long. Guy Maddin, who had appeared in drag in *The International Style*, appeared on the scene just as Paizs was exhausting himself with his first feature, *Crime Wave* (1985). But while Maddin's

debut shared some stylistic similarities with Paizs' work (the familiar Film Group static camera "style," usually attributed to the lack of a decent tripod; the self-conscious references to older film forms), it was different in tone and content. In his first film, Maddin eschewed comedy for something more profound and personal; *The Dead Father* (1985) is a harrowing expression of grief, loss, and finally acceptance.

But the same year that saw both *Crime Wave* and *The Dead Father* also saw something which bore no relation to either: Greg Hanec's first feature *Downtime* (from a fine script by Mitch Brown). This stark, drily funny, minimalist portrait of urban ennui was the first Winnipeg film to screen at the Berlinale. In its portrait of the aimlessly intersecting lives of several lonely people, it presented a completely different view of Winnipeg, one rooted in the actual place rather than in the shadows of old film styles. Also in 1985, MB Duggan produced several performance-based shorts; John Kozak stepped away from his earlier experimental work (*A Fascist Can't Dance* [1981] and the superb *Roomtone* [1984]) with the fairytale, *The Golden Apple*; and one of the Group's most prolific, if not most successful, directors, Barry Gibson, made a first appearance with *Flipside*.

Such a pattern—a varied collection of unsung artists toiling in obscurity as a handful of others achieve a relative stardom—characterized the subsequent two decades of the Film Group's existence. The intrinsic quality of their work aside, Paizs and Maddin's success owe a large debt to the efforts of Greg Klymkiw. The distribution coordinator at the Film Group in the mid-to-late-80s, Klymkiw was also a collaborator on Paizs' work and served as producer on Maddin's first three features. His considerable marketing skills helped to bring both filmmakers to wider attention before he left for Toronto, where he went on to produce for Cynthia Roberts and Alan Zweig, and for some years has been Producer in Residence at the Canadian Film Centre. About four years ago, he was joined by Paizs who became Director in Residence. Paizs, having come to prominence with his inventive short comedies, stretched himself to feature length with *Crime Wave*, an uneven film which debuted at Toronto in 1986. The reception was mixed, with the film's second half considered weaker than the first. Paizs returned to Winnipeg and shot a new ending, but by the time he unveiled the revised version the next year, interest had waned. For some years, he toiled in tv production in Toronto before eventually making a second, under-rated feature, *Top of the Food Chain* (1999). (His third feature is currently in post-production.)

Paizs' struggle was, sadly, an experience all too common among other Film Group directors. Lorne Bailey followed *The Milkman Cometh* with a feature, *The Green Peril* (1995), which vanished quickly, and he moved on

to crew for other filmmakers, never directing again. John Kozak made a series of increasingly ambitious films, starting with the historical fantasy *A Celestial Matter* (1987), the inventive *Running Time* (1988), the psychodrama *Dory* (1990), culminating with the theatrical feature *Hell Bent* (1994). The financial failure of this last had a stalling effect on Kozak's career; finding it too difficult to finance subsequent projects, he now heads the film studies program at the University of Winnipeg. Three years after *Downtime*, Greg Hanec followed up with the more ambitious, but less creatively successful *Tunes-A-Plenty* (1988), after which he turned his attention away from film. MB Duggan followed his experimental shorts with the remarkable dramatic debut *Mike* (1989). The story of a schizophrenic told through his own perceptions, the film's style reflected the disintegration of the character's world. Duggan then moved on to the feature *Smoked Lizard Lips* (1991), a disastrously unfunny satire, following which he left the Film Group and immersed himself in the Winnipeg arts administration community. Caelum Vatnsdal, having left his first short, *Kundalini Unbound*, unfinished, went straight to the feature *Black As Hell, Strong As Death, Sweet As Love* (1998), a twenty-something coffeehouse talk-a-thon which gained little attention. Vatnsdal went on to become a writer and broadcaster, and recently co-directed *Teardrops in the Snow*, a documentary about the making of Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003). In the 90s, Jeff Erbach produced a series of startling shorts which revolved around childhood, sexuality and the prairie landscape (*Gavin Frogboy*, 1994; *Soft Like Me*, 1996; *Under Chad Valley*, 1998), then produced the feature *The Nature of Nicholas* (2002), which received favourable festival attention, but only limited distribution, and has not yet been followed up.

There have been many other less ambitious Film Group members who produced one or two films before moving on. People like Adam Druxman, who was 19 when he made his short, *The Guinea Pig Age* (1989), a little parable about the human race poisoning itself into extinction with our addiction to technology. He then moved west to B.C. where he worked his way up through the AD department on films by such directors as Peter Hyams, eventually becoming Paul Thomas Anderson's First AD on *Magnolia* (1999) and *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002). Pierre Naday started with *Geezy Street* (1990), whose faux noir/horror style seems an echo of Film Group "tradition," but continued with the completely original comic gem *Mr. Bus Stop* (1991), whose humour is so specifically rooted in the Winnipeg experience that perhaps the joke is inaccessible to those who haven't lived here. But then, after co-producing the mixed-bag collaborative project *The Exquisite Corpse* (1992), he moved east and now makes a living as a production driver in Toronto (most recently spotted in the credits of the dismal *Dawn of*

the *Dead* remake). Artist and sculptor Gordon Wilding produced a single, disturbing short in 1996, *Rapture*, about a security guard's unhealthy obsession with a young boy, before embarking on a successful career as a production designer.

When I joined the Film Group in 1989, at the beginning of the Third Age, everything was done on 16mm, shot on a variety of aging cameras—hand-wound Bolexes (Guy Maddin's camera of choice for *The Dead Father* and 1988's seminal *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*), an old CP sound-on-film newsreel camera, a couple of Arri BLs. Everything was cut on two Steenbeck flatbeds, forever in need of maintenance, held together by baling twine and prayers. On average, a beginning filmmaker would take between 18 and 24 months to complete a five-ten minute first film—a lot of stamina was required, scrounging for resources; there was no arts council money for beginners, just small Film Group grants, a little help from the National Film Board's PAFPS (now FAP) program and, if you were lucky, indulgent relatives. A decade later, many newcomers are whipping things off on faster and cheaper digital video. But perhaps something is being lost; when greater effort was required, a higher level of commitment was necessary to complete a project. Recently the policy of "every film will get a Cinematheque premiere" has been set aside; now the premieres are juried to weed out the more trivial digital work.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in experimental work triggered in part by the innovative "Bolex Experiment" which was started early in the decade. An attempt to spur production by getting around the more elaborate and lengthy funding processes which made starting a project daunting, the Bolex Experiment required only a brief proposal from the filmmaker for a modest project; the award was simply one or two 100' loads of 16mm film, plus processing and access to basic equipment. The idea was to allow people to loosen up and play with the medium.

But since the mid-80s, everything has been overshadowed, for better or worse, by the work of Guy Maddin. Unquestionably the most successful filmmaker to emerge from the Film Group, Maddin has produced seven features and numerous shorts since 1985, all marked by a strange quest to create "authentic" early sound cinema. His obsession with early film styles is admirable in a way for, well, its sheer obsessiveness. But ultimately, his films sometime seem to end up in the dead end of irony, their cleverness preventing engagement and exhausting the viewer by dint of their relentless superficiality. Maddin definitely has a way with images, best showcased in his shorts, unburdened from the onerous demands of narrative. Yet his work often brings to mind Borges' story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in which the narrator offers a

passionate defence of Menard, a French writer who in the early 20th century committed himself to the monumental task of rewriting, word for word, Cervantes' epic novel. "Those who have insinuated that Menard devoted his life to writing a Contemporary Quixote besmirch his illustrious memory. Pierre Menard did not want to compose another Quixote, which surely is easy enough—he wanted to compose the Quixote." The narrator goes on to compare identical passages from the "two works," striving to prove how much deeper and more meaningful the same words are coming from the later writer. It sometimes seems that Maddin's admiring critics are saying something similar: that it is so much more difficult, and more meaningful, to create a 1930-style film in today's climate than it was for those who actually toiled in 1930, when such stylistic tics came more naturally and therefore required less creative and intellectual labour.

Ironically, even Maddin, the most renowned of Film Group members, continues to teach at the University of Winnipeg. One of his students and the next critical favourite to emerge from the Film Group, was dawson, whose imagery is often striking. Like Maddin, dawson is obsessed with recreating the look and tone of early film, or rather our experience of early film in scratched and damaged prints—most startling in *FILM(knout)* (2000), a ten-minute flagellation fantasy. But there's something oppressive about his work, the feeling that from the first frame of the first film he has calculated, with absolute certainty, his style, thus leaving himself little room for discovery and evolution (a feeling reinforced by the sameness of Patric Caird's music). This impression receives some confirmation from the fact that after peaking with the elaborate *FILM(dzama)* (2001), dawson's subsequent films, *The Fever of the Western Nile* (2003) and *Defile in Veil* (2003), are his weakest, showing less visual imagination and, in terms of content, just treading water.

I see more cause for optimism in the messier, less accomplished, but far more exploratory and inquisitive works of people like Sol Nagler and Victoria Prince. Ragged works to be sure, but actively building their creators' voices out of a wider range of sources. Prince's work is profligate in style and influences, from the elegant Quay Brothers homage *The General* (2001) to the outrageous, Svankmajer-inspired *Claygirl* (2002), and her haunting Kafka adaptation, *The Burrow* (2001). As more and more narrative is being executed on video, there has been a resurgence of experimental work—some of it emulating such artists as Stan Brakhage, some of it (like Nagler's own *perhaps/We*, 2003) growing out of the filmmaker's own personal and cultural experience. In recent years, Nagler, as chair of the board and a committed filmmaker himself, has inspired a lot of activity among the members, particularly with his hand-processing workshops.

As Jeff Erbach has commented, with the advent of digital video, techniques like hand-processing (facilitated by the presence one floor up in the Artspace Building of the photography co-op, Floating Gallery) are the only way to maintain the "film" in filmmaking—offering visual possibilities which simply can't be emulated in video. Under Nagler's guidance, through a series of workshops, these techniques have evolved into an on-going communal process, and distribution coordinator Matthew Etches informs me that there is now more festival interest in these experimental films than in the narratives which increasingly, for budgetary and other reasons, are being produced on video.

Nagler's influence is apparent in one of the most impressive recent releases, Clive Holden's experimental feature, *Trains of Winnipeg* (2004). Subtitled "14 Film Poems," this haunting assembly of short ruminations on death, love, loss, and some kind of redemption, makes use of hand-processing, an attention to the physical surface of the film, a combination of Super 8, 16mm, old home movies, and new footage made to look old and degraded. Holden's cyclical, repeating images and evocative soundtracks support readings of his poetry. Initially, Holden's flat, inexpressive voice is alienating, but the film gradually accumulates a visceral power and emotional force (*18,000 Dead in Gordon Head* is genuinely chilling in its description of the poet's affectless response to a murder). In fact, it gathers such force that when we get to the final textless segment, our minds fill the space provided with our own thoughts and emotions, waking us to feelings to which Holden has unexpectedly led us.

Looking back on my own connections with the Film Group, it becomes possible to see how the organization creates the networks that make indigenous filmmaking possible. During the three-and-a-half years I worked there, first as training coordinator, then as Barber's assistant at the Cinematheque, I became friendly with many who were just beginning their filmmaking careers. I made three shorts myself in the first half of the 90s, involving many other members, and worked with others, from Erbach to Maddin, on their own films. Though I still return occasionally to teach workshops and sometimes sit on arts council juries which award money to Film Group members, the work produced there leads me to think that the organization, like so many of its members, has moved on. As the Film Group enters its fourth decade, perhaps a New Age is beginning, one which moves the organization out of the shadows of Paizs and Maddin and into a new, as yet undefined space, reflecting once again the Group's origins as a collective of disparate individuals joined only by a shared love of film. ■