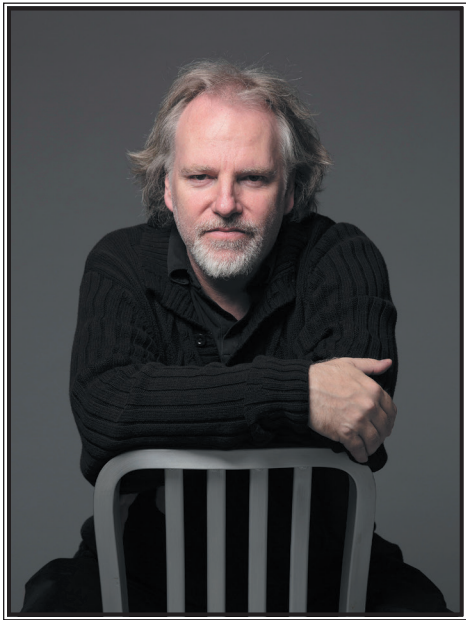


FEVER DREAMS

CANADIAN FILMMAKER GUY MADDIN IS INTERVIEWED BY DEAD URUGUAYAN AUTHOR HORACIO QUIROGA

North-South dialogue



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THE works of Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin induce divine delirium. The viewer yields to fever dreams, as if floating through a fetid, flooded jungle overcome by sunstroke or viper attack. Images and ideas swirl, at once terrible and delightful. Demented laughter reigns.

The award-winning director of *Cowards Bend the Knee*, *My Winnipeg*, *Sissy Boy Slap Party*, and the 2015 feature *The Forbidden Room* is a singular artist. I love how Maddin brazenly wanders along the eschatological cliff edge, treading a treacherous line between life and death, reality and imagination. To do so in a way that speaks to my Uruguayan soul is a form of white magic, since Maddin’s home is in the remote North, a hardscrabble city called Winnipeg located at the frigid heart of North America. Maddin makes his baroque cinematic blizzards sear and shimmer like a heatwave settling on the Gran Chaco.

There is something special in Maddin’s capacious intelligence, ironic tone, and innate storytelling skills that excites creative misfits around the world, so I was eager to hear how he spoke of his unique artistic vision.

Your brother killed himself when you were a child, and your father died when you were 21. I, too, know about such things. My father accidentally shot himself and died when I was 20. And later, I accidentally shot and killed my good friend. I’m obsessed with death. My stories bristle with it, from snakebites and sunstroke to gunshots and machetes. How does death surface in your work?

I truly love the directness with which you treat death in your stories — even more direct than Poe! It just happens, for no discernable reason, just as the deaths must have seemed as they came to you from infancy on. I couldn’t handle the deaths that came to me, always denied them at some level. I could never say goodbye to loved ones, even as they mouldered in their graves. I always made sure the “deaduns” felt welcome to return to life as frequently as possible in my dreams. Your dead stay dead. Mine just enter a sublime state in which we finally start getting to know each other. In my dreams, I finally set to work on the problems

that beleaguered our relationships during life, finally get to tell my beloveds that I love them. I have no idea why I was so shy to express love to the living, but I never forget to tell a dead one how much I love him or her. Death has — in many ways, not all — been a tremendous opportunity for me to fix my love. I guess I’ve made movies that attempt to explain that approach of mine. I should really just make some infomercials about the grieving process I practise and make some money off it.

There’s death and grief, then there’s guilt. Your films seem to luxuriate in guilt. It’s a kind of possession. Why are you so haunted?

Well, this is why the infomercials won’t make me rich. Sometimes the guilt over a death just won’t go away. My Aunt Lil, who raised me in my house like a second mother, keeps dying the same painful death over and over every night, downstairs alone in her bedroom, forgotten, just as I forgot her while she was dying in real life — I was too busy with some stupid spring romance to properly console her as the cancer worked away. Night after night she returns to suffer again, and while she never says a single thing to reproach me, I know it’s too late to cram all the love I feel for her into a single dream. All I can do is weep — copiously! — into her almost-forgiving bosom, drenching her mastectomies with a flood of anguished tears, almost every night. And still she suffers. I worked out many a problem with my dad in the 39 years since he died, but my Aunt Lil and I can’t seem to get past this first point, that I played hooky from her while she died.

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No sooner do your characters die, Horacio, then you quickly wrap your stories up. The death of my characters is really just the beginning of everything for me. So even though I haven’t quite worked things through with Auntie, at least I’m trying. But I haven’t even started trying to understand my living loved ones yet. It’s like I’m investing heavily in my guilt futures portfolio. I’m cash poor, but guilt rich. There will never be a shortage, no matter what happens to the price of oil.

I’ve been dead for 80 years. Does that bother you?

On the contrary, and you must understand this by now, your long-deadness makes you all the more likeable.

My adopted, spiritual home is in the remote Misiones region of Argentina. The locals there have a popular phrase: “En el monte puedes hacer cualquier cosa” (In the bush, you can do anything). Does something similar apply in Winnipeg? Is that why you’ve remained there, on the edge of civilization?

I feel like your spiritual home isn’t far from mine, that if I just removed a loose board from a Winnipeg back-lane fence and slipped through the space that opened up, then slid through the bushes in the yard suddenly revealed, that I would soon find myself hacking through your Misiones jungle, where I would encounter you. We are neighbours and good friends, are we not?

The Paraná River, the second-longest in South America, brims with drama and life. It is a devil. What about the rivers of Winnipeg?

The rivers of Winnipeg are too sad to discuss, they really are. Though I will mention *Drag the Red*, an incredibly moving initiative formed by First Nations volunteers who take a boat up and down our Red River, dragging for missing and murdered aboriginal women, whose tragic cases the government and police have unforgivably neglected. Most people here simply don’t care about what happens to these people, and the river has swallowed up a lot of them. *Drag the Red*’s heavy-hearted labours aspire to provide closure and dignity to the families of these tragic victims. I’m appalled volunteers are needed to provide a service the government should provide, but bless these lovely people for the grief-work they conduct. What beautiful souls, these selfless folk who climb into a boat each day to search our murky waters on behalf of a heartbroken community. Unfortunately, it feels their work will never be done.

In many ways, we are opposites. My short stories are linear and direct, moving from beginning to end like an arrow to its target. Your work is convoluted and filigreed, often non-linear. My stories are firmly rooted in reality. Your work consciously blends fantasy and reality, melodrama and irony, revelling in ambiguity. And yet you are a fan of mine. Why?

I am filigree-addled, ambiguity-drunk, easily distracted into venturing down overgrown jungle-like pathways where I get lost in long narrative detours. I have long envied the stripped-down writers — Knut Hamsun, John Cheever, Raymond Carver, Lydia Davis, and now Elena Ferrante — who actually pack more possibility into their pages by draping their obsessions over the bare-but-precise framework of their stripped-down sentences. You are one such master of never-an-extra-word virtuosity.

Someone once described me as the best character in my work. Does that apply to you?

More than enough people have described me, to my face even, as a terrible person. But maybe that makes for a better character in a film, if not in the world. Regardless, I’ve been aware for a long time that the movies I’ve made have had my DNA all over them — that they, in fact, *are* me. I can’t help it; I have my compulsions. The same sort of stuff recurs in the movies. I can’t seem to work it out of my system, though I really am trying.

Your recent project, Séances, is a large series of short films, each inspired by a lost or destroyed film from across time and around the world. Are there any Uruguayan or Argentinian films in the series?

There was the lost film *Tararira* by Romanian/Argentine poet Benjamin Fondane. Apparently he was the leading exponent of a brief craze among the surrealists for publishing un-filmable scripts, hybrid texts of a sort that were only meant to be projected in the mind of the reader/viewer. We adapted Fondane’s *Tararira* in Paris, using the actors Christophe Paou, Amira Casar, and Jacques Nolot. The original film was made in 1936 and no one knows what happened to it. The reels probably got swept up in Fondane’s fatal misfortunes when he went to Europe and was arrested by the Nazis. He died at Auschwitz. The only way to see *Tararira* was to remake it. Our adaptation is based on just a few sentences gleaned from a synopsis found on the internet — now even

African-American troops in the trenches of the Great War. When one of the latter is mortally wounded, he hallucinates that the bigot is actually his mother back home. He begs the bigot for one last kiss before he dies. The bigot kisses the black man just as his last breath expires into the kisser’s mouth. Transformed by the love he feels transferred into his soul, the bigot traverses the trenches looking for more African-American soldiers, dying or otherwise, to kiss. Brad Grinter’s *Never the Twain* from 1974 survives only as a poster, whose tagline reads: “He is possessed by the spirit of Mark Twain at the Miss Nude World Pageant.”

Those were the two that got me started, but then I discovered countless lost titles from marginalized people. Like James Young Deer, who many believe was African American, but who passed himself off as Native American because he found that dissembling permitted slightly less hostile environment for filmmaking



FROST BITE. Lovers stroll among frozen horses in Guy Maddin’s 2007 docu-fantasia *My Winnipeg*.

that synopsis seems lost! It’s gone! But our version of it is very dreamy, I must say, because I interact with it the way I interact with my dead loved ones, with a projection of it, a luminous mirage of something or someone who isn’t really there. Of course that’s the reason for the *Séances* project to exist in the first place, to allow me to continue relationships with the missing.

That project, and the feature which grew out of it, The Forbidden Room (co-directed with Evan Johnson), required massive amounts of research into the history of film.

There were a few lost films I researched early that compelled me to dedicate all these years to adapting and remaking so many lost films. D.W. Griffith’s *The Greatest Thing in Life* from 1918 was about a bigoted white soldier upset because he has to fight alongside

in America. I discovered Tressie Souders, the first black woman director. Her work is so lost no one even knows her film titles. There was *The Seahorse*, and other Cambodian films, destroyed in the ’70s by the Khmer Rouge, their filmmakers murdered in that country’s genocide. There’s the lost title, *The Lynching* of Elizabeth Taylor, by Edward Chodorov, unable to work in America because of the House Un-American Activities Committee blacklisting. And *Creature of Comfort*, a 1960s Canadian horror film about a carnivorous blanket. And hundreds more, all so haunting because they exist only as titles with no known final resting place, as unhappy film spirits doomed to wander the landscape of film history forever unable to project themselves for people who might love them.

Do you believe in ghosts? In vampire bananas (which make an appearance in The Forbidden Room)?

I believe in such things only when holding a camera in my hands. But that’s the most dangerous time.

In my story “*The Exiles*,” I write about picaresque characters who remind me of you, “born with spin on them, like billiard balls.... They usually hit the cushions and take off in the most unexpected directions.” You have one of the most electric minds I’ve ever come across. From where does this hunger and capacity for culture, high and low, originate?

What a beautiful compliment, Horacio. No one has ever said anything as nice. Born with spin! I love it. As for high and low culture, my co-director Evan and I are both proud of the “brow range” of the gags in our *Séances* project. We like to think there is something there for everyone. No sooner did we get as sophisticated as we could than we plunged down to the base and buffoonish depths at which we are most comfy. We aspired to make Jerry Lewis routines Robert Bresson would like, and vice versa; Bresson gags Lewis would love, though I suspect the latter is too jealous to laugh at Bresson. □

A “randomized” version of Guy Maddin’s ongoing *Séances* project is viewable at the National Film Board of Canada’s website, seances.nfb.ca.

English translations of Horacio Quiroga anthologies include *The Exiles and Other Stories*, *South American Jungle Tales*, and *The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories*. After a diagnosis of incurable cancer, Quiroga killed himself with cyanide in 1937.



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LISTEN TO ASIAN VAMPIRE BANANAS. The celebrated 2015 feature *The Forbidden Room* stars Charlotte Rampling, Roy Dupuis, Louis Negin, Udo Kier, and Geraldine Chaplin.