

## Winnipeg Eats Itself

### L'Atelier National du Manitoba's Scheme for Sovereignty

*“Winnipeg is not a city. It is a form of Irony.”<sup>1</sup>*

There has been much speculation as to why such a unique filmmaking community has emerged from the Winnipeg Film Group, an infamous filmmaking collective founded over 30 years ago in the world's coldest city<sup>2</sup>. Drowned by sky and isolated by an ocean of wheat fields, filmmakers from this island city developed an edgy, original sense of Cinema that can be recognized the world over as distinctly Winnipeg. Common approaches and concerns for storytelling and image-taking emerge and subsequently reinvent themselves in the shadows of legendary Film Group alumni such as Guy Madden and John Paizs. Winnipeg's *Nouvelle Vague* is L'Atelier National du Manitoba. Breaching the radically individualistic and competitive habits of previous generations, L'Atelier creates work as a collective. Composed of cineastes, archivists and visual artists, its agenda is overtly political and expands outside the Cinema through various forms of subversive, guerilla-style street art projects. Inside the theatre, its work incorporates established themes of prairie post-modernism, such as an obsession for ruined/damaged motion picture material (celluloid and video), ironic historicism, self-hatred and narcissism. Pitting Winnipeg against itself, the collective creates nationalistic, sociopolitical, culture-jamming documents that explore the esoteric roots of Canada's other distinct society; Winnipeg Manitoba.

### Manifesto Excerpt #1

- WE call ourselves l'Atelier-National du Manitoba-to distinguish ourselves from the 'Canadian filmmakers'-this horde of rag-pickers which makes good business out of its old rags.
- WE compose cinÈ-poems about our civic prison of misery. <sup>3</sup>

L'Atelier was concocted by Mathew Rankin, a former Winnipeg ex-pat who received most of his film training in Quebec and Iran, and Walter Forsberg, an American whose initial exposure to Winnipeg as a programmer at the Chicago Underground Film Festival. Its fluctuating membership includes local filmmakers Mike Maryniuk, Alek Rzeszowski, Eve Majzels, and Darryl Nepinak. They create collaborative film projects under the banner of L'Atelier, as well as independent works. *Death by Popcorn: The Tragedy of the Winnipeg Jets (2005)* was L'Atelier's inaugural collaboration. It is a media-collage *tour de force*, an overture that established its political trajectory: uncovering the roots of Winnipeg's distinct society by sifting through the ruins of its discarded visual history. *Death by Popcorn* is an allegorical study that takes place during a tenuous time in Winnipeg's history; the city has just lost its precious NHL hockey team *The Jets* and consequently, is on the brink of a third mass armed uprising.

Along with *Les Québécois* and *Les Acadiens, Manitobans* are among a minority who have instigated several violent revolts against the Canadian federal government. The first was the failed Red River rebellion of 1869, when Louis Riel tried to establish a New Jerusalem in what is now known as St. Vital, a bustling suburb, housing Winnipeg's largest and most successful shopping mall<sup>4</sup>. The second was the General strike of 1919, during which the city's various labor groups joined forces to stage a violent protest against labor conditions imposed by

the bourgeoisie working for Eastern Canadian companies. The most recent flaring of Winnipeg's nationalistic temperament came in 1995, during the politically volatile month of May. 30 000 Winnipeggers marched along the same paths as the Winnipeg General Strike demanding an end to the capitalistic ruin of Canada's national sport and imploring NHL executives to "*Save our Jets*".

*Death by Popcorn* is not a film that attempts to clearly depict that moment in Winnipeg's history. Instead, it is an experimental, historical mélange, aiming to explore Winnipeg's peculiar national characteristics. These include a perpetual narcissitic self-hatred, a subsequent obsession with finding a new Louis Riel-type messianic leader to alleviate this self-hatred, an incessant need to demand a bargain on everything from furniture to civic infrastructure, and the tendency of Winnipeg filmmakers to create films that incorporate textured, self-referential, expressionistic images.

The source material for *Death By Popcorn* is composed of discarded betatapes rescued from a dumpster by L'Atelier members. The city's unforgiving elements took their toll on these fragile pieces of outdated media and consequently the images incorporated in the film are mere textured traces of their past betamax glory. L'Atelier used the material to weave and stitch together a compelling history told in fragments. They create an epic tale that descends into tragedy as Winnipeg's hockey heroes become powerless against their foes. They trace the rise and fall of a promising hockey team, and the sense of failure that permeated the city as their team perpetually lost to its arch nemesis; Wayne Gretzky's Edmonton Oilers.

As the sordid tale unfolds, *Death by Popcorn's* textured fragments gain a manic momentum of turmoil and urgency. L'Atelier enlists the services of local luminaries such as Kern Hill Furniture Coop magnate Nick Hill, whose howling television commercials became an

anthem to Winnipeg bargain hunting rituals. Several mustache bearing sports casters wearing neon spandex biking shorts do their best to placate the national hubbub, while perogie tycoon Hunky Bill distracts the crowd with 30 second perogie making lessons. *Death by Popcorn's* use of seemingly insignificant local commercials is perhaps its most fascinating feature. In the philosophical spirit of Walter Benjamin, L'Atelier sifts through the ruins of community access and local television programs, weaving together fragments of outdated media in order to uncover an authentic portrait of the Winnipeg Nation<sup>5</sup>.

The Film also introduces what would soon become one of L'Atelier's obsessions and infamous trademarks: the messianic depiction of Burton Cummings, former front man to 60s rock band The Guess Who. The filmmakers observe Cummings as he casts himself in the role of the Jets' redeeming savior. Playing the role of Doubting Thomas, L'Atelier edit together outtakes of a promotional photo shoot with this pseudo Louis Riel; broken betatapes show him struggling with his hockey gear, stumbling as he skates in the now demolished Winnipeg Arena, all the while sermonizing to a temperamental nation of isolated doubters. *Death by Popcorn* concludes with the teams inevitable sale to a larger, more significant urban center. The clincher in this tragic tale is that, in 1979, Gretzky almost became a Winnipeg Jet, and that after the team had been torn from its adoring homeland Gretzky bought the franchise and became the team's general manager in Arizona.

### **Manifesto Excerpt #2**

- Everybody has self-destructive impulses but Winnipeg's are more developed than most. The people of Winnipeg are perpetually committing acts of genocide upon their own heritage, rubbing out all traces of their own history, and consigning their civilization to the forgotten mists of time<sup>6</sup>

Winnipeg's particular style of Cinematic experimentation assimilates formal techniques developed by other Canadian experimental film practitioners, fusing them into a coherent narrative framework and creating a unique indigenous style of storytelling. L'Atelier's investigation of Winnipeg's sociopolitical history draws on and expands upon the cinematic tradition of prairie-postmodernism. Coined by eastern Canada's filmmaking elite, the term *prairie post-modern* describes a style of filmmaking, which emerged in the early 1980s, initially through the early works of John Paisz (1981-1985)<sup>7</sup>. Paisz' short film series *The Three Worlds of Nick* (1981 -1984) and his feature film masterpiece *Crime Wave* (1985), established not only a post-modern aesthetic, but also introduced an aesthetic of paranoia and self-consciousness. Paisz' films became categorized as post-modern because he introduced an overt sense of ironic historicism to accentuate the structure of his films. In his short film *Springtime in Greenland* (1981), Paisz directs particular scenes as though shooting a postwar propaganda newsreel, extolling the virtues of sterile suburban living. He enlists an overtly callous, dry narrator to evoke a sense of doubt within the dramatic elements of the film. Scenes are filmed in tableau-like perfection, mocking both the events within the film and the act of filmmaking itself. Paisz' omnipresent sense of irony suggests that all his characters are overtly conscious of their roles in the heavily constructed scenarios. In many of his early works, Paisz casts himself in the role of protagonist, thereby introducing a unique style of diary filmmaking that became a popular experimental documentary genre in eastern Canada. His work induces a sense of personal mythology, which subsequently became a crucial idiosyncrasy of a Winnipeg style of filmmaking, particularly in the work of Guy Madden and L'Atelier<sup>8</sup>. Paisz also introduced a unique form of first person filmmaking, a term Winnipeggers like to call bargain basement

filmmaking. This method of filmmaking is considered by members of L'Atelier to be an enshrined Winnipeg ordinance. Paisz shot most of his films himself, with a crew that often never exceeded three, and a bolex camera that had to be wound by hand.

### **Manifesto Except #3**

- The discount is to Winnipeg what soccer is to Brazil and police reports indicate time and again that Winnipeg's notoriously prolific homicide rate is due mainly to bargain-related disputes<sup>9</sup>

L'Atelier's obsession with ruined visual materials can also be seen as a mannerism inherited from previous generations of prairie auteurs. Degraded celluloid that looks discovered rather than created and beaten betatapes that have lost most of their magnetic resonance are yet another means of expressing the ironic historicism of the prairie post-modern. Guy Madden was the first filmmaker to expand Winnipeg's omnipresent sense of irony from the dramatic structure of the film (Paisz), to the actual material of the celluloid itself. Madden's expressionistic style is reminiscent of primitive cinema, where the boundries between dramatic and experimental filmmaking were undefined. His films can be seen as a rewriting of Canada's inexistent Cinematic history<sup>10</sup>. Films such as *Tales From Gimli Hospital (1988)*, *Archangel (1990)*, and *Careful (1992)* portray characters struggling with the fuzzy, high-contrast film material that has brought them to life. Words are spoken out of sync. and gestures become unrecognizable, blurring into abstract forms of pure light. By creating a series of witty experimental narratives within an expressionistic style reminiscent of the 1920's, Madden inspired evolution in Winnipeg's self-reflexive cinema. Instead of utilizing a sterile, self-conscious Mise-en-scène within the film, Madden introduced a ruined, degraded sense of cinema, where structural

fabrications of the filmmaking process are made self-evident through failed photographic material.

#### **Manifesto Except #4**

- WE believe in the narrative perfection that lies within the abstracted limelight underneath the scratch films of Stan Brakhage, the single frame savagery of Bruce Conner, the absurdist stuttering of Martin Arnold, the obsessive Super-8 of Robert Morin and the meticulous geometries of Norman McLaren. WE wish to infect our dramatic plots with the formalist energies of these disfigured children of cinema.<sup>11</sup>

L'Atelier's goal in its various filmmaking/art making projects is to discover the roots of Winnipeg's ironic self-reflexive cinema. Film theorist and eastern Canadian filmmaker Bruce Elder has written a fascinating exploration of the self-reflexive tendencies of Canadian filmmaking in his book *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture (1989)*. He claims that Canada's unique experimentations in Cinema emerge from a particularly ominous relationship between Canadians and their imposing geography. Examining both philosophical and cinematic trends, he claims that a sense of fear and self-consciousness was induced by an overwhelming landscape that seemed unknowable and mysterious. This created a dualistic approach to filmmaking, "according to which reality is made up partly of mental stuff and partly of physical stuff, with the two entirely different from one another."<sup>12</sup> According to Elder, this is what accounts for a certain type of post-modernism prevalent in Canadian Cinema, whereby elements within the films themselves always become contextualized by the actual process of filmmaking. This stylistic movement resulted in unique formal experiments by filmmakers such as Micheal Snow, Jack Chambers, and artists associated with Quebec's Cinéma Direct movement. Elder's assessment can also be used to account for the unique evolution of prairie-

postmodern cinema. Similar structural characteristics emerge within the films of John Paisz and Guy Madden, particularly through the emphasis they place on the structural limitations of the act of filmmaking, and its integration into the dramatic elements within the films.

The impact of Canada's Great Plains on Winnipeg's mindset is undeniable. It is a city drowned by its landscape, stranded by unbearable winters and summers plagued by mosquitoes. To combat the sense of civic doubt induced by such an inhospitable climate, various municipally funded promotional campaigns have been developed aiming to instill wide-spread *Winnipeg Pride*. These campaigns, which always inevitably fail, become the target of various L'Atelier culture jamming film/public art projects. They replace the city's public postering campaigns with their own unsolicited banners and murals. Posters with the words *Stand Tall* scrolled underneath a high contrast print of Burton Cummings' smiling mustached face and iconic portraits of the late Nick Hill exclaiming *Discount Everything* foster an alternative, authentic sense of civic pride. For L'Atelier, the only authentic image is a ruined image and as such, they believe that publicly funded initiatives, such as the *Love Me Love My Winnipeg* Jingle Contest and the *Winnipeg: 100 reasons to Love It* campaign, which were both created in the late 80s to alleviate Winnipeg's endemic self-hatred, are nonsensical and futile. Rather, Winnipeg's self-hatred must be unearthed and embraced through an alternative aesthetic exploration that includes sifting through the ruinous consequences of Winnipeg's destructive tendencies. L'Atelier's political agenda is to stand by while the visual material from these perfect failures are tossed into Winnipeg's National dumpster. Allowing the harsh Elements of North America's coldest city to take their toll on the material, they then sift through the garbage looking for a perfect fragment that will become ideal fodder for L'Atelier's textured collages.



### Manifesto Excerpt #5

- WE believe that every frame of film and every whisper of sound must be dehumanized beyond belief through the use of hand processing, Super-8 to 16mm blow-ups, Xerox photocopiers, desynchronized shutter speeds and optical printing. The use of video is encouraged, provided that it is recorded on low-fi VHS cassette cameras characteristic of the early 1980s and then transferred and re-transferred *ad infinitum* from one VHS tape to another and back again. Digital technology (that scourge of Dogme!) is hateful, but Betamax may win amnesty on the condition that it too is subject to generational decomposition. Only in this way can cinema achieve the depth of self-loathing and self-destruction worthy of its new homeland in Winnipeg.<sup>13</sup>

Emphasizing their conviction that *history is written by losers*, L'Atelier's new projects aim to expand its agenda of exploring Winnipeg's distinct national characteristics in fragments. *I Dream of Driftwood (2007)* is one of a series of L'Atelier super8 cityscape commissions. These films investigate the characteristics of Winnipeg's urban landscape through degraded, textured celluloid images. Winnipeg's architectural configuration provides the most palpable morsels of its unique national peculiarities. An established metropolis at the turn of the 20th Century, Winnipeg was once known as the gateway to the west, with architecture rivaling Chicago. As Canada expanded and depended less on railway transportation, Winnipeg's booming metropolis went bust. Now enormous art deco warehouses and antique skyscrapers stand vacant and ignored. Subsequent urban renewal projects that never really took hold look like awkward scars on an abandoned cityscape. A poignant example is the Esplanade Riel bridge debacle. Etienne Gaboury, a Manitoba born descendant of Louis Riel created a beautiful pedestrian bridge to connect the French and English districts of Winnipeg. Bargain hunting Winnipeggers were initially convinced that the 22 million dollar bridge would be worth the money, for this

architectural marvel would, without a doubt, restore the big city panache taken from them when they lost their Hockey team. However, when it was discovered that there was a 1 million dollar toilet being installed for a high-end restaurant on the bridge, Winnipeg nearly erupted into a full blown riot. To appease this outrage, the city called on its modern-day Louis Riel, Burton Cummings, to establish an authentic piece of civic culture on the bridge. Instead of the promised high-end restaurant, the vox populi succeeded in placing a home-grown, fast-food establishment partially owned by Burton Cummings: The Salisbury House. The subsequent red carpet ceremony, and Burton Cummings' place in Winnipeg's sense of self is the subject of L'Atelier's current work in progress; *Negativipeg*.

This new project is in equal parts docudrama, public art project and public access cable talk show. The film centers around Winnipeg's irreverent behavior towards its civic pride savior Burton Cummings. The project gets its name from a particular incident where Cummings tried to assert his messianic authority during a domestic altercation at a 7-11 convenience store. While trying to break up the dispute using his status as a local demigod, he was hit on the head with a bear bottle by a drunk, self-loathing Winnipegger. As he was healing from the incident, a reporter asked Cummings what his opinion was now of the city that he had personally chosen to liberate from its civic misery. Cummings responded, "Winnerpeg? Try Negativipeg!". Thus the name for this project was born. *Negativipeg* investigates various local attitudes towards Burton Cummings and The Salisbury House, asking those people interviewed to dramatically reenact the fateful incident at the 7-11. L'Atelier treats this incident as a pivotal moment in the assertion of Winnipeg's national identity. It was the golden calf to Moses' descent with slurpies in hand. It is depicted as a smashing of the idols, kicking the medicine man out of town, eating a burger to

spite the madcow. L'Atelier adds to *Negativipeg* a barrage of guerilla street art projects, plastering the Winnipeg cityscape with their Burton Cummings' *Stand Tall* banners. This is not only a reference to the famous ballad written by Winnipeg's prodigal son, but is also a reference to Winnipeg's need for salvation from its civic misery, a need to convince itself that all its suffering is warranted and soon another Louis Riel type figure will emerge to establish its dreams of sovereignty.

### **Manifesto Except #5**

- Notre lutte est une lutte de liberté et d'indépendance. Notre pays, la vraie patrie de notre Manitoba, c'est le Québec, pas le Canada. Nous avons confiance, qu'un jour, il y aura un rendez-vous avec l'histoire et le Québec, et nous avons confiance aussi que le Manitoba sera là, avec lui, ensemble, pour y assister.<sup>14</sup>

(Our fight is a fight of freedom and independence. Our country, the true fatherland of our Manitoba, is Quebec, not Canada. We have faith, that one day, there will be an appointment with history which Quebec will hold, and we have faith that Manitoba will be there with Quebec to assist.)

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<sup>1</sup> This is an excerpt from a manifesto first published in *BlackFlash Vol23.3 2006*. P. 24 – 28. The article features a series of seven rules the Atelier posted on the wall of their editing room while completing their film *Death by Popcorn : The Tragedy of the Winnipeg Jets (2005)*.

<sup>2</sup> According to Environment Canada, The federal department in charge of weather statistics and analysis, Winnipeg is the world's coldest city with a population over 600,000. [www.on.ec.gc.ca/weather/winners/highlights-e.html](http://www.on.ec.gc.ca/weather/winners/highlights-e.html).

<sup>3</sup> This is an excerpt from a previously unpublished manifesto written circa 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Riel's religious convictions are particularly well documented in his collected journals. Riel, Louis. *The Diaries of Louis Riel*. Edited by Thomas Flanagan. Edmonton; Hurtig Press, 1976. P.169.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. "These on the Philosophy of History". Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York; Schocken Books, 1985. P. 258.

<sup>6</sup> L'Atelier National du Manitoba, 'The Seven Pillars of Atelier Aide-Memoire on the Cinematic Form of the Winnipeg Jets.' *Blackflash*, Vol. 23.3. 2006, 26.

<sup>7</sup> The term Prairie-Postmodern gained in popularity with the broadcast of a television news profile on the Winnipeg Film Group. It was created by the CBC National News and was first broadcast on July 4th 1991 on *The Journal*.

<sup>8</sup> This is particularly evident in Guy Madden's first film *The Dead Father* (1985), and his recent return to more autobiographical work *Coward's Bend the Knee* (2003). L'Atelier's obsession with uncovering Winnipeg Lore can also be seen as an extension of a local obsession with Personal Mythology.

<sup>9</sup> L'Atelier National du Manitoba, 'The Seven Pillars of Atelier Aide-Memoire on the Cinematic Form of the Winnipeg Jets.' *Blackflash*, Vol. 23.3. 2006, 25.

<sup>10</sup> This idea was explored in the documentary *Guy Madden : Waiting for Twilight* (Noam Gonick, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> This is an excerpt from a previously unpublished manifesto written circa 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Elder, Bruce. *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989. P. 29.

<sup>13</sup> This is an excerpt from a previously unpublished manifesto written circa 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.