

ISOLATION IN THE 80S

Part of a Six-Set Historical DVD Collection from the Winnipeg Film Group
Curated by John Kozak

Introduction

The Winnipeg Film Group was barely six years old when John Paizs made the deceptively simple social satire *Springtime in Greenland* in 1981, a remarkable achievement considering that the Film Group was still quite comfortable operating within the largely self-imposed limitations as a producer of documentaries reflecting local experience, no doubt a mind-set inherited from a history of Canadian filmmaking quite satisfied to indefinitely hover on the periphery of an actual industry.

Though the Winnipeg Film Group had been diligently exercising its mandate to support and promote independent filmmakers, those with the entrepreneurial spirit who initially took advantage of this unique opportunity largely took their cue from the National Film Board, and specialized in documentary, animation and the occasional experimental film. It is not surprising that these early Film Group members, suddenly free to pursue their own projects independent of institutionalized production, would select the content they always wanted to do, but would apply the same style of filmmaking they were so familiar with. And although the Winnipeg Film Group provided the infrastructure to support independent filmmaking, the spirit of a true independent film ideology, in the manner of David Lynch or Jim Jarmusch, did not yet exist in Manitoba. This would have to wait for the right filmmaker to come along with a highly personal vision to fully exploit this opportunity. This was the contribution John Paizs made, not just to the Winnipeg Film Group, but to a certain degree to Canadian filmmaking in general.

Perhaps inspired by the independent film phenomenon taking hold in the United States at the end of the 1970s, initiated by films like *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, or perhaps as a desperate reaction to the almost complete creative anaesthetism of mainstream cinema in North America, perpetrated by the unfortunate success of *Star Wars*, it still must have required a considerable strength of will (or perhaps pure ego, another essential quality of the true auteur) to accomplish this, but Paizs' vision was wholly unique.

The Winnipeg Film Group, now firmly established as a film production co-operative offering both equipment and encouragement, soon attracted other filmmakers who brought with them an intense and personal vision, now far more interested in form than in content. It was this drive for personal expression, more than any other factor, that accounted for the Winnipeg Film Group's extraordinary growth, both in terms of membership and creative output, throughout the 1980s.

Considering the fertile creative environment that existed at the Winnipeg Film Group during this period it is not surprising that there was such a volume of production, nor is it surprising that the quality was so high. What is puzzling is that so many of the films explored thematically similar terrain. The filmmakers that had the courage to venture into drama, and the confidence to produce longer and more complex films were marshalling their resources to explore predominantly one theme, isolation.

Four films which best exemplify this theme are Paizs' *Springtime in Greenland*, *The Dead Father* by Guy Maddin, *The Milkman Cometh* by Lorne Bailey and *Mike*, by Bruce Duggan. Oddly, they also seem to mark a pattern of development throughout the 1980s of deeper and deeper penetration into the alienated psyche; a movement from a social landscape, where the character can't get in, to a psychological landscape, where the character can't get out. Even more striking is the rather remarkable perfection each of these films achieved in melding theme and style. In each of these films the story being told cannot be separated from the way it is told, another defining characteristic of the auteur.

Springtime in Greenland (1981)

Paizs was the first filmmaker associated with the Winnipeg film group to reject the traditionally prescribed role of the "prairie filmmaker" and begin to forge a unique stylistic identity. From his earliest films, especially the acerbic *The Obsession of Billy Botzki* in 1980, Paizs' style, with its anachronistic aesthetic and intense self-awareness (which somehow allows his films to be both hip and naïve at the same time) is already apparent. And although Paizs went on to far more ambitious productions, including television and feature films, *Springtime in Greenland* remains his most perfect film, seamlessly integrating style and theme.

On the surface, *Springtime in Greenland* is a social critique, wrapped around a simple story of rivalry. Focusing on the social milieu, the film is Orwellian in its rendition of the perfect suburban community. There is a sense of total acceptance by the inhabitants of "Greenland", a complete capitulation to the wonders of the modern age and unquestioning appreciation for the sense of social privilege that accompanies this acceptance.

At the start of the film, we meet the typical suburbanites who populate "Greenland", a modern-day utopia, that includes temperature control, automatic lawn sprinklers at the touch of a button, self-cleaning oven, garborator and "automatic bread toaster that discharges the toast when ready." These wonders are, in fact, rather unimpressive. What is important for the populace of "Greenland" is not the wonders themselves, but the complete and unanimous surrender to them. As though in deference to this, a short film within a film entitled "The House of Tomorrow" suddenly explodes on the screen. Shot in the style of a 1950s newsreel it shows the happy Greenlanders taking some guests on a tour of their house, eager to share their good fortune with the uninitiated.

As they take us through the house, the cutting becomes faster and faster, the big band accompaniment reaches a crescendo, and homeowners and neighbors finally erupt into an almost bacchanalian dance around the lawn sprinklers. The acceptance of their world, and especially of “things” is an aggressive acceptance, resembling religious fervor more than happiness or contentment. It is their religion of consumerism which allows them to be totally at home in their world.

In the middle of this world we are introduced to Nick, a brooding introvert, totally devoid of joy, who keeps a wary eye on family and friends alike. The first time we see Nick he is sitting on the front steps of his house, holding a cane, later used to plant a tree but it visually stigmatizes Nick from the outset as a social cripple in this land of perfection. The sun shines brightly on “Greenland” as the inhabitants go about their morning rituals, reveling in the splendors of modern living, but as we cut to Nick, sitting on the steps brooding, he is slowly engulfed in shadow, as the sun drifts behind the clouds. Nick gravitates towards darkness.

Immediately following the dance around the sprinklers we cut to Nick diving into his back yard swimming pool. In a beautifully realized sequence, Nick drifts in complete silence through an eerie pattern of shapes and colours, in a world all his own. The pool, which serves as a communal gathering place where revelers pop champagne bottles and frolic to the tune of “Cockeyed Optimist”, is like a sensory deprivation tank to Nick. This perfect world offers nothing to Nick, especially joy. Ironically, the film is sub-titled, “Nick at Home”, but he is anything but “at home” in this alien world.

Greenland is a world of light and colour, blossoming trees and sun glittering off sprinkling water fountains, but Nick is associated with darkness. Nick only comes to life at night, while the “real” world sleeps. Nick roams the house after dark during a thunderstorm, his face obscured by shadow. As he wanders outside we become aware that there is something deeply disturbing about a man standing shirtless in the middle of the street, staring hypnotically up at the night sky, oblivious to the wind and rain. Something dangerous is lurking in the shadows. It turns out to be Nick.

It is inevitable that Nick’s presence would lead to conflict and it emerges when Corny Blower, the irrepressible clown that everyone inexplicably adores, arrives on the scene. While everyone delights in the antics of Corny, Nick stands apart, mournfully chewing on a hot dog, his back to the crowd in an awkward stance that conveys both defiance and uncertainty. Nick eventually gets drawn into a diving contest with Corny, the winner of which will win the admiration of the local bathing beauties. And while Corny indulges in childish tomfoolery, it is Nick who resorts to violence.

Nick eschews the rewards of modern living. He is not interested in garborators, lawn sprinklers or other trappings of suburban status. He is drawn to a darker side of the human experience; something which he knows cannot be displaced by a beautifully manicured lawn. And so he prowls the house at night, like a cat hearing some primal call. No matter how many happy, smiling people surround him, or how pivotal his role is in neighborhood politics, Nick will always remain alone.

The Dead Father (1986)

Like Paizs, Guy Maddin emerged as another early auteur leading the Winnipeg Film Group from documentary to drama. Both make highly personal films and both deal with the main character's alienation from their environment, but stylistically they are very different. Where Paizs distances the viewer from his subjects, Maddin explores the psychological landscape. While Paizs' camera stands back and looks on with a critical eye, Maddin's camera enters the mind and looks out from within. Paizs' isolation is defiant and confrontational. Maddin's isolation is uncertain and terrifying. Maddin's narrative is not story oriented or linear. It is a metaphoric examination of the realm of emotion. While in *Springtime in Greenland* the essential confrontation is written across a social landscape, in Guy Maddin's first film, *The Dead Father*, the social landscape, which is only a blur to begin with, continuously narrows throughout the film until all we are left with is a dreamscape, with only brief fragmentary suggestions that a social world ever existed at all.

Stylistically the film fragments and obfuscates, like groping for half-buried memories. The images are dark, blurry and grainy. The landscape, though contemporary, somehow seems ancient and decaying. In spite of the numerous day exteriors, the film is weighted by a sense of claustrophobia.

The Film opens in an attic, an insight into the shadowy, cluttered mind of the protagonist, as the camera slowly approaches an old decaying trunk. From the very first images of the film the character, through voice over, isolates himself in a reverie of disjointed reflections; some are memories, some are fantasies. "From the heart of my attic, where I often run and hide, I have emerged, this time with black chunks of my family; photographic albums which I now lay before you as random recollections." One of the albums is labeled "The Dead Father". The stage is set for a dream voyage through memory and fantasy, a fevered attempt to reconcile with regret.

As the film progresses, scenes and images become progressively more disjointed and chaotic, but the narrator promised only random recollections. There is no attempt at a linear story. It is a dream. The connections are metaphoric, not literal. In an early scene in the kitchen the mother makes sandwiches while the children play cards at the same table where the father is laid out like a corpse. As though part of the meal, the father's unusual presentation elicits no reaction from the varied characters that populate the son's world. Later, when the son goes

to reconcile with the father he takes a spoon and begins to devour him. Throughout the film, imagistic connections present themselves with the irresistible logic of dreams.

Again, in a childlike effort to gain his father's approval, the son presents him with a kite he has constructed. The father rejects the kite and in a desperate attempt to redress this error the son dashes off and returns offering two dead fish, but the father has already returned to his sanctuary in the woods. Earth, sky and water are brought together in the son's allegorical confabulation as the father rejects the son's offering of both the airy lightness of the sky and the solemn deepness of the sea, instead preferring the arboreal environment of earth and decay.

The dream-like metaphors all serve to characterize the confrontational posturing between father and son, served up, as promised, as random recollections. The father appears as a shadow against an opaque glass, banging desperately to be let in, while the son turns away, and in a chance meeting in the veranda, father and son face off with fists clenched in a stance that conveys both defiance and embarrassment, neither willing to make eye contact. The father seems to drift in and out of the son's life, making unexpected appearances like a ghost haunting him, desperate to connect with the son but able to proffer only ambiguous signs which the son seems incapable of interpreting. In the end, all that is left is confrontation.

In the most striking and memorable scene in the film, the son resolves to "reclaim him once and for all," and ventures into the domain of the father. In the dead of night he makes his way into the thick woods behind his house, the beam of his flashlight nervously scanning the thick underbrush, exposing corpse after corpse littering the ground, a graveyard of failed and abandoned relationships. Among them he finds his father. He bares his father's torso and brandishing a giant spoon, presses it against the bloated flesh. Then, steadying his nerve and struggling to hold back the nausea rising in his throat, he begins to feast, like some pitiful vampire. But the father wakes before he can completely devour him. The deed unconsummated, he must return his father to the trunk in the attic and the son ends where he starts, hiding in his sanctum, jealously guarding the memory of a failed relationship.

The Milkman Cometh (1988)

Where Paizs tends to distance us emotionally from the characters and focuses strongly on a distinct sequence of events, and Maddin almost abandons story altogether, focusing on the character's inner struggle, Lorne Bailey seems to miraculously combine the two styles. Stylistically Bailey has more in common with Paizs; thematically, he has more in common with Maddin. But it is the unique tone of Bailey's films that distinguishes them; simple, methodical, with an almost hyper-sincerity, and filtered through a retro-fifties stylistic vision.

Like Paizs, Bailey is more concerned with image than character; what the images, cutting and sounds signify rather than what they are. At times, the composition of the image and timing of the cutting are so precise they almost have the look of animation rather than live action. Like Maddin, Bailey's focus is on the psyche. But almost paradoxically Bailey, like Paizs, takes a distancing approach to his material, but not to the characters within a social context, rather in a psychological context. His character is not only isolated from the world around him, he is also isolated from himself. We are alone with the character, but not close to him.

The style of the film is methodical and precise, paralleling precisely the sort of existence Kendall, the main character, unconsciously longs to escape from. The film starts by laying out the parameters of Kendall's existence. The first image is a close-up of a set of keys, and the narrator declares, "the keys to success". But they are not Kendall's keys. They are not keys in a literal sense. They are an abstraction. The narration continues: "A fine car, wonderful home, twenty-four hour access to the office." All of these goals are abstractions for Kendall. Kendall is pursuing the symbols of success and not success itself. For him there is no real world. This is Kendall's dilemma. He longs for a world that doesn't exist and so he gradually substitutes fantasy for reality. It is not surprising then, that his perfect world of peace and perfection would also be an abstraction.

The narration informs us that Kendall is an integral part of the workplace, a well-oiled machine that defines his existence, and that he is climbing the ladder to success, but the images belie this. We never see him interacting with his co-workers. He works alone, he eats alone and he lives alone. He is apparently about to get married, but we never see his fiancée. The world he considers himself a part of is a façade that crumbles at the merest hint of turbulence which, for Kendall, is triggered by a vision.

While stopped in traffic, his eye is inadvertently drawn to the image on the label of a can of milk, depicting a peaceful valley, mountains in the distance, cows leisurely grazing in a pasture and a picturesque red barn nestled in some trees. The image takes Kendall by surprise. He doesn't even know he is missing something in his life until he sees an image of what that missing piece might be. The narrator explains, "with the can nestled in his hand, the world around him quickly dissipated. He couldn't help but be drawn into it. There was a place too beautiful to exist in this world." For Kendall it represents an unattainable peace and contentment; a memory of an experience he probably never had. He drifts into the image, and we are suddenly inside his head, exploring memories that the film itself tells us cannot be trusted; a series of generic childhood memories. They too are only abstractions. Kendall has replaced one illusion for another.

But the environment has changed for Kendall. His illusion of success shattered, he can no longer play his role as part of the team and he is thrown into conflict with everyone around him. Suddenly his co-workers are his enemies, sabotaging his quest for inner peace. Kendall becomes totally dissociated from the world around him. At

home a faucet is left running, a TV dinner goes uneaten, the phone is left off the hook. He sits in front of the TV but ignores it, his eyes instead locked dreamily on the symbol of his new obsession. When he replaces the picture of his fiancée with the picture from the milk can it is discovered by an employee and the entire office gathers to mock him, his final alienation from his co-workers.

Totally alienated from his environment, and frustrated by an unattainable fantasy, Kendall is finally driven to seek psychiatric help, but this too is only an abstraction. We never get to see the psychiatrist, only a pair of animated hands and a disembodied voice that might represent reason and stability. The voice tells him to seek “a substitute for his desire,” the same trap he has already fallen into.

Kendall goes on a pilgrimage, ostensibly to escape his obsession, but unconsciously driven to encounter something real. But when Kendall finally does discover the real world, it lacks both the order of his office and the tranquility of his fantasy. Kendall finds his farmer’s field with cows and haystacks, but it is not the perfect Eden of his vision. It is arid and dusty and bug-infested. His journey finally terminates at an endless landfill. For Kendall, unable, or unwilling to accept imperfection, the real world becomes an undulating sea of garbage which eventually consumes him.

Mike (1990)

With a background in performance art and abstract poetry, Duggan is, above all else, a formalist. Though his films are usually populated with eccentric characters in bizarre circumstances, the essential meaning of the piece is found in the structure, not the content. And though, stylistically, Duggan is worlds apart from his contemporaries at the Winnipeg Film Group, thematically he shares a similar vision of the individual in a world that does not recognize him, and will not let him in.

In *Mike*, it is the main character’s own fractured psyche that creates the world around him. The narrative and the style of shooting and cutting mimic the experience of the main character. Mike’s isolation is total. There is no world to even connect to, only bits and pieces of experience filtered through Mike’s psychosis.

The film opens with a series of brief, fractured images, interspersed with darkness as Mike claims his meager positions while checking out of a psychiatric hospital; a worn out wallet with nothing in it, a comb, a garbage bag full of clothes, a ball of string, three screws and a television that doesn’t work. His possessions make sense only to himself.

Mike makes repeated but futile attempts to connect with those around him. As he checks out of the hospital he tries to get a date with the nurse who quickly reminds him, “it’s not allowed”, but not allowed by who is never established.

Mike suddenly finds himself at his new home, a run-down rooming house where he is greeted by a run-down landlady who gives Mike a tour of the boarding house comprised of jump cuts and brief flashes. One moment they are climbing the stairs, the landlady in mid-sentence, and suddenly they are in a hallway. Then Mike is alone in his room. We get only glimpses of a location. The trip to the boarding house is never shown. Locations are not established; they have no exterior reality. Transitions are noticeably absent. That is not how Mike’s consciousness works. Even dialogue comes in snippets. Everything is a brief moment of disjointed sound and image, just as Mike’s reality is made up of bits and pieces of unrelated experience. There is no continuity in his life, reflected in the fractured imaging in the film’s structure.

Mike wants to be involved, to make contact. He practices asking a girl on a date in front of the mirror. Personal contact is his goal but it continues to elude him. He is aware of people, constantly seeking them out. In fact his final moment in the film is a desperate search for anyone. He makes a mental note of the number of people the landlady tells him are staying at the rooming house but he never sees them. He sees only a handful of the sixteen who are supposed to be there and is visibly upset when he is informed that they have never been there. He goes to a crowded video arcade seeking contact, and tries to make friends with the proprietor who later disappears, along with everyone else in the arcade.

Mike wants human contact, but human contact requires continuity. Mike’s world is too fractured to allow human contact to take root; “people are there, and then they’re not there”. In the coffee shop, Mike’s very presence seems to make the coffee girl disappear into thin air. Mike’s experience of reality is too intermittent to ever allow a relationship. The longest conversation Mike has is with the inhabitants of the rooming house, but it is a jarring conversation, broken up by a series of jump cuts. The conversation has no focus or direction. It is as though everything in Mike’s world is glimpsed “through a glass darkly”. Finally, as if in surrender to this image, Mike spray paints the windows in his room black.

The only continuity in Mike’s life seems to be his television, which he hauls around and hugs to his chest as though it provides him with a window to some real and stable world. Whenever he gets a chance he turns on his TV which broadcasts mostly static. Occasionally, for a half-second, there is a burst of image and speech, but it almost immediately reverts to static before anything comprehensible can be discerned. Whatever message some reality outside of Mike’s immediate experience is trying to send him, it will never reach Mike.

The more Mike loses touch with the world around him the more fragmented the film is in its construction. Jump cuts become more jarring and more frequent, scenes become briefer and more disjointed. Images begin to repeat, overlap and lose all sense of linearity. Mike finally smashes his TV and runs; but to where? He is fleeing through the rooming house, then he is on the street, and then he is back in the rooming house. Temporal and physical continuity has totally broken down. In the end there is no place and no time, just the essence of desperation and flight.