



Guy Maddin's  
*The Heart of the World*

Complaining about a lack of avant-garde films in the Perspectives Canada program at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) is like complaining about a lack of brown bears on Yonge Street. They might have been there once, they may even deserve to be there still, but even the most strident environmentalists would find it difficult to argue for their repopulation. The critters are dangerous, after all. And Toronto does not lack zoos for the beasts. Excellent ongoing programming from Pleasure Dome and the development of Images into one of the better experimental festivals in the world has thoroughly obviated TIFF's never-very-heartfelt inclination to represent an artistic cinema. Perspectives Canada cannot be reproached for the lack of effort and skill it brings to the task. It does well rounding up dramas and documentaries, and for less tractable products it simply and gratefully acknowledges that others can do the job better.

But TIFF's near-hermetic concentration on dramatic films does buck a trend developing among mainstream festivals in North America. Both Sundance and Telluride have initiated experimental sidebars. The emblematic event in this context is the Views From the Avant Garde program presented as part of the New York Film Festival, resuscitated in 1996 and now a prestigious affair. Views From the Avant Garde also screened one of the very few experimental films Perspectives Canada did present, Barbara Sternberg's *Like a Dream That Vanishes* (which premiered at the Images festival last April, incidentally). Evidently the only major statement that Canadian cinema could make this year, the film has already been discussed previously in this column (*Take One* No. 27), but it's worth noting that it was well-received in New York and heartening to read American commentary – like that from Brian Frye on IndieWire – capable of detecting its pedigree from an Ontario regional cinema, particularly Jack Chambers' films.

Also at Views From the Avant Garde were two Canadian films that were not part of Perspectives Canada, but did screen at TIFF as part of *Preludes*, the 10 short films the festival commissioned from well-known Canadian filmmakers. One of them was Michael Snow's inconsequential bonbon, *Prelude*, which had its minute in the Walter Reade Theatre and can otherwise be ignored. The other was Guy Maddin's *The Heart of the World*, five minutes and at least 600 shots that thrilled at TIFF and also found universal but slightly misplaced acclaim from New York reviewers. Despite the variety of silent-era schools jostling in Maddin's film, many critics took *The Heart of the World* for a pastiche or parody of early Soviet cinema. The failure of socialism is an obvious target for ridicule and Maddin's doll-faced, ardent heroes can readily appear as Eisenstein's

conquering proletariat recast as arty but still harmless versions of Boris and Natasha. However, the film's Russophobic aspects are not parodic, and Maddin's valourization of Soviet cinema's more immoderate gestures is an earnest proposition for feckless contemporary filmmaking. As for the editing, montage is not pastiche, and *The Heart of the World's* remarkable intelligibility amid a blistering pace reveals how much more he owes to Dziga Vertov than whimsy, certainly not a pastiche in the cynical postmodern sense of the word.

The Soviet's influential theories about editing developed from a practice of filmmaking as a collective enterprise, an approach begging for resurrection within the current glut of "personal cinema." Maddin's means of production don't approximate the studios of Kino Pravda, but his film's coherence does reflect the advantages of a highly collaborative approach with editors and cinematographers. Much of the camera work and editing for *The Heart of the World* was undertaken by another Winnipeg filmmaker, deco dawson, whom Maddin has nurtured from his filmmaking course at the University of Manitoba. One of dawson's own projects, *Film (Lode)*, ranked with Sternberg's film as one of two successful experimental works presented at Perspectives Canada. At 22 years old, dawson is still enraptured by his mentor – Maddin's influence pervades the elegiac tone and begoggled characters inhabiting *Film (Lode)* – but dawson's own talents do emerge. *Film (Lode)* mines a weirdly arrhythmic vein and is gaily unpredictable throughout. Not seen at Perspectives Canada was dawson's equally blithe *Film (Knout)*, which deserved the Best Experimental prize it took at last August's Chicago Underground Film Festival, and not only for lack of competition. A study of a girl and her rope, also inorganically edited, it's like watching a dance film without having to suffer the obnoxious motion of dancers.

Also as part of TIFF, Cinematheque Ontario devoted three nights to the films of American Robert Beavers, apparently another New York connection. Views From the Avant Garde presented a similar Beavers retro in 1999. The screen time that could have been devoted to an international program of experimental film at TIFF was thus regrettably lost. These desiccated films demonstrated little except Beavers' knack for adorning them with a fraudulent cachet of valuable rarity that is irresistible to curators. Which in turn demonstrates little but how sorely Cinematheque Ontario (and TIFF, in this context) missed the talents of former programmer Chris Gehman (its specialist in experimental cinema) who would not have been duped. Of course, Gehman is now working for Images. ●