

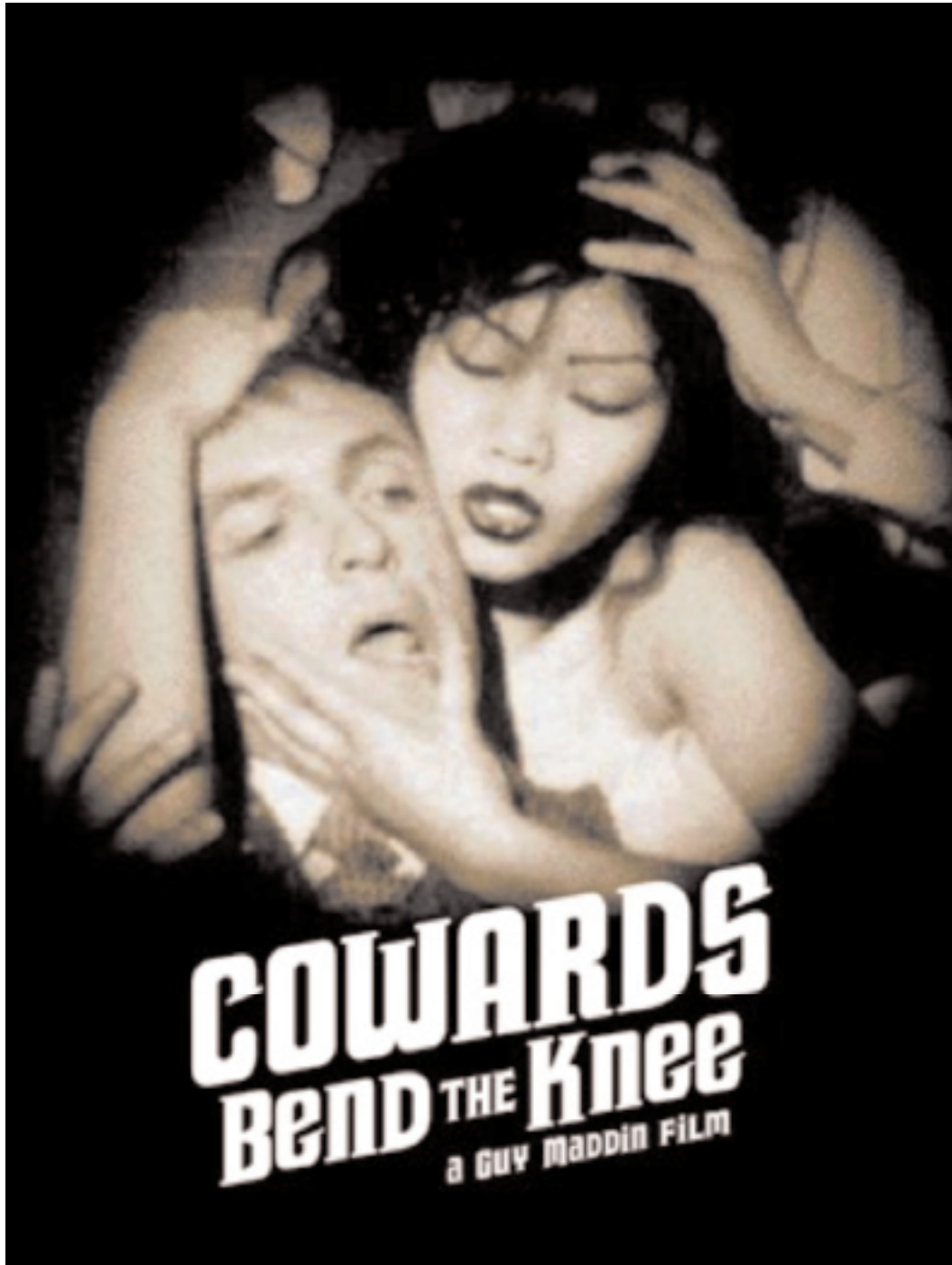
"MADDIN'S MASTERPIECE!"

—J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*

"PSYCHOTICALLY INVENTIVE!"

Film autobiography at its most hilariously creative....
A formidable addition to the ever-evolving Maddin oeuvre!"

—Ronnie Scheib, *Variety*



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

COWARDS BEND THE KNEE a GUY MADDIN FILM

Adapted from a ten-part peephole installation, COWARDS BEND THE KNEE is “jam-packed with enough kinetically photographed action to seem like a never-ending cliffhanger...In this twisted and poisoned wish-fulfillment, the mythomaniacal Maddin casts ‘himself’ (actually, Darcy Fehr) as a hockey sniper made lily-livered by mother and daughter femme fatales, and resurrects his father as as the team’s radio broadcaster and his own romantic antagonist. Set in a shadow-suffused hockey arena and a Mabuse-like beauty salon-slash-abortion clinic, the plot drips with Grecian formula, as sordid family secrets spawn unintentional murder most foul.”

—Mark Peranson, Vancouver Film Festival

SYNOPSIS

Guy Maddin, a hockey player with the Winnipeg Maroons, cravenly dumps his pregnant girlfriend Veronica right in the middle of an abortion in order to be with someone new, someone met just minutes earlier, a fiery and domineering girl named Meta.

An instant before losing consciousness on the operating table, Veronica sees ardent Meta dragging away Guy, the father of her unborn child. Guy ravishes Meta upon a pile of hockey gloves in the Maroons' dressing room as Veronica dies crawling across the ice trying to find him, leaving a trail of blood frozen there.

Guy discovers his new girlfriend Meta is pathologically obsessed with her dead father Chas, a man whose death she is sworn to avenge—she is convinced her mother Liliom and step-father Shaky have murdered him. Guy finds that Meta is engaged in a project to turn him into someone more like the dead father. Meta feels she has completed the conversion of her lover into Chas when she bullies abortionist Dr. Fusi into transplanting the strangely preserved blue hands of Chas onto her lover. Fusi fools Meta and Guy by just pretending to perform a hand transplant—he merely dyes Guy's hands blue.

Now that Meta believes her lover has her father's hands, she forbids him to play hockey, forces him to take up the dead man's former profession of hairdresser. Next, Meta commands pliant Guy to strangle her mother Liliom, and vile Shaky, too, so that Chas's hands may have their revenge. But when Guy attempts to murder Liliom, he ends up making love to her instead.

Guy's attempt to murder Shaky is more successful—he strangles the step-father to death right on the ice during a big hockey game in front of hundreds of witnesses. However, not one witness sees him do it. Guy lives in terror of his out-of-control hands, which, seemingly with a will of their own, next murder his best friend Mo.

In the meantime, Guy has fallen in love with a new woman who works alongside him at the hair salon. Unknown to anyone, this new woman is actually the ghost of his dead ex-girlfriend Veronica, who has returned to wreak vengeance on her heartless killers.

The arrival of this ghost sends Meta into agonies of jealousy. Meta attempts to kill the new woman, who is actually already dead. With the peril of death threatening his new beloved (the ghost), Guy finally accedes to Meta's wishes and strangles Liliom to death. Meta is surprisingly traumatized and grief-stricken by this long-demanded murder. The Furies are unleashed upon all. Meta now hates Guy and demands her father's hands back.

Dr. Fusi amputates the hands of Guy, who deliriously celebrates his new freedom from the accursed Meta by playing, handlessly, in a climactic hockey game just hours after his surgery. This game occasions a final tragedy: Meta meets her dead father and dies!

CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE STONE BABY

Interrogations Towards an Elusive Autobiography

Guy Maddin in conversation with Robert Enright

Q. Why did you write the autobiographical treatment in the first place?

A. I had a strange commercial intent at first. So many people over the years had criticized my pictures for being non-narrative. And George Toles and I worked very hard at putting narratives into the scripts and together we've read a million books and we both like to think that we know what a narrative is. But it is a source of continuing frustration that people would say - and it was always a compliment - we really like your films, they're so non-narrative. So I thought, damnit, I'm going to get a narrative story that people are going to recognize, something that has legs. I started reading Greek tragedy, Electra, Medea and stuff like that, and basically I just took some premises from these super-durable stories. The things that I end up layering around these rock-solid premises are invariably pure autobiography; they're things I care about, things that have been bugging me lately, things that have obsessed me for a long time, long-held secret desires - it's always a great opportunity to sneak those into movies. And before I knew it I had something that was almost 99% autobiographical, and perhaps this is what makes those Euripidean tragedies so durable, the original structures seem to be my autobiography as well. Those are ingenious plots that describe everyone's life at one time or another, so once I slipped away what little remained of Euripedes, what was left was some sort of core sample of me.

Q. So other than answering the criticism that you didn't know how to organize a narrative, Cowards Bend the Knee didn't begin any differently from any of your other films?

A. It became more consciously autobiographical because I thought maybe this is my last picture. I really thought that. I had a real sense that there were just a few seconds left in the game and I had a lot of yardage to make up - I have to use NFL metaphors - and so I had to throw a long bomb right into the end zone and hope that someone on my team would catch it. So I stacked it up with things that really mattered to me. I set it in my autobiographical childhood haunts; the beauty salon and the hockey arena that I grew up in. I peppered the list of characters with names that had been bouncing around in my heart for my entire life, or anagrams of names. That really helped flying buttress me into a more autobiographical setting, but my way of trying to fashion a story was exactly the way it's always been. I've always felt that I only include things that are psychologically true in my stories, no matter how bizarre, stupid, silly or gratuitous the episodes in them may seem. I only know my own psychological truth.

Q. So did you find it easier to write once you decided that you could indulge your own autobiography? This was a long treatment originally, much longer than most things you're written in the past.

A. It was well over a hundred pages long and it could be much longer if I'd wanted to expand on it. I wish I could write well enough to sustain a piece of fiction over a short story's length. Maybe some day, after I've read more and settled down and have really worked at it, I'll be able to grind out a very short novella or something. In the meantime, this will have to do.

Q. But was it easier to write?

A. Yeah. Once I decided this was really me, then all of a sudden I was seized with a sense of mischief, a sense of tattling on my family, of reviewing uncomfortable things about myself. I hate victim literature and talk-show victim culture. I hate it with a passion but gosh, the urge to self-flagellate is pretty strong when you're writing an autobiography, especially when you've led such a loathsome life as I have. I can only hope that the spectacle of me trying to inflict pain on hard-to-reach places on my own body is amusing to some people.

Q. Is shame an emotion that has a catalytic nature for you?

A. Well, it's kept me hiding under beds for years and I only emerge armed with a camera. Yeah, shame is hilarious. I love humiliation scenes in movies. I don't often remember quotes but I like Flannery

O'Connor's response when she was asked whether she felt handicapped as a writer because her disability made it difficult for her to travel, and she said that anyone who has survived childhood has travelled enough. I'm continually tickled by what families do to one another and the depth of the brand they leave sizzling on the rumps of their offspring and siblings and parents, let alone what lovers do to each other's hearts. It's nice to know there's an inexhaustible oil tanker's worth of plots and pain for a melodramatist to siphon off for the rest of his years.

Q. If you were reading Medea then you had already raised the level of emotional intensity. Did your source material encourage you to move in a certain direction and adopt a certain tone before you even began to make the film?

A. Yeah. I remember going to a dress rehearsal of the Canadian Opera Company's Electra and I went over to Maestro Richard Bradshaw and said, 'that was pretty good' and he said, 'it was terrible, it's not crazy enough, it's not hysterical, the frenzy isn't pitched high enough' and that thrilled me. I literally got goose bumps. Someone with a giant pay cheque actually complaining that something wasn't crazy enough. Because like a good little Canadian I'd been putting dampers on my melodramatic conceits all these years, and I was overjoyed that somebody would get pissed off if you don't floor the gas peddle. I probably still didn't floor it enough. I have my own vocabulary for telling these stories, and it's pitched pretty high. Although I'll have you know, I've lived the story in Cowards Bend the Knee, and it doesn't come anywhere near the intensity of the real experience.

Q. When you say you've lived the story do you mean that you could track the events in your own life, episode by episode, in a literal way?

A. I'd like to insist that, yes, I have lived every one of those episodes in a literal way. That the stuff in the document and on the screen in those little peepholes is my life exactly, just maybe not searing enough. But a completely true autobiography still has to be translated onto film emulsion and then viewed through a lens. I've had to refract every one of these episodes through a prism that divides up and changes all the characters into their basic component parts, like colours of the rainbow. And because it's the prism that views my life, I've held it up for inspection and smudged it with my own hands; it's been handled so much that it's kind of blurry, gauzy, vaseline-y. Because they are memories I feel obliged to present them in the same order in which memories visit me. I always think of my memories as an extension of my nervous system and that they visit me in a skittish, electronic way, they sometimes leap over my nerves in a race against each other, and some of them hit me sooner than others and out of order, and some memories need to be revisited two, three, four or five times in the span of just a few seconds to be really savoured, or to give yourself some sort of masochistic, loathsome shudder. So, yes, I have experienced all of these things in precisely this fashion, and if I went to present my autobiography again, it would be just as true and completely different.

Q. So was the process of filming a recapitulation of your life, was it a reliving, or was it a separate event.

A. You may have to keep hounding me to answer this question because it requires a big answer. My mother is recovering from knee replacement surgery, she's elderly, and I was visiting her – unlike my character in the autobiography – and reading a story to her from the newspaper. It was a fantastic story about an elderly woman in Morocco, similar to my mother, who gave birth to a stone baby over the weekend. It was an ectopic pregnancy that went wrong in 1956, the year I was born. And this baby calcified and turned into what they quoted as "a stone baby".

Q. Have you been reading The National Enquirer?

A. No, no. This is a real wire story, you can check the archives. So the doctors delivered it by a Caesarian birth. I don't think they induced labour on this 75 year-old woman and she delivered a seven pound, seven ounce stone baby that is exactly my age, 46 years old. I feel I have to set up a correspondence with this baby and tell it what it's been missing during a lifetime that's spanned exactly the same years as mine. Or I feel that it as easily could have been me. Or, better still in the slipstream way of thinking about things, when there's some sort of intersection, like the year 1956, that it's just as easy to believe that it was me, that I am the stone baby. For Christ sake, I was just at my mother's bedside, just the way a newborn baby in a hospital would have been. And you're never really more rid of your mother than anyone else is, nor she of you. I love that stone baby but it was chilling, just being the same age somehow. It could have been born the same year that Don Larsen pitched his perfect game in the World Series like I was. I was set on the floor to watch that and I guess in Morocco they maybe

wouldn't have watched the World Series. I'm not into parallel universe narratives, or sliding doors, or anything like that but that seems to me to be something refracted accidentally through a fractured prism. It's just a little intersection. When I read The Baseball Encyclopedia, I'm constantly looking for death dates that match up with my birth date just to see if I'm the reincarnation of somebody. All I've found is some utility infielder who couldn't even bunt a ball to the pitcher's mound. I'm still waiting. Maybe a future great baseball player will be born on the day I die and he'll have to look up my death date. I'm always looking for these little glancing things, so I guess I was aware that I liked coincidences and intersections. But they're for my own pleasure and I would never in a million years be self-indulgent enough to think anyone would try to decode those things. I'm not that hubristic.

Q. Since you've mentioned your mother, let's talk about a scene that I found hilarious in some ways and treacherous in others. It's the scene in which you black out the granny glasses your mother is wearing and stage a modest sex act in front of her. Did you have any reservations about that scene, or was it just a case of reliving an incident that may or may not have happened?

A. Let me clarify this. This is Guy Maddin, the director, who did this to his own mother, the actress, in a movie in which someone playing Guy Maddin has sex in front of a character played by my real life mother, but who, in fact, plays his girlfriend's grandmother. There was some partial nudity but I really wanted my mother in the movie and she surprised me by actually campaigning to be put in. I actually started by asking her if she had any friends who might want to participate and she said she would do it and she wouldn't take no for an answer. As you know, actors can be terrible once they set their sights on a part. So my mom was an irresistible force. So she got the part but she is very prudish. It's that simple; she's pre-prudish, like a 17th century Lutheran. Well, she is a 17th century Lutheran. I can explain that if you want. Nothing that happened in the 20th century ever changed her attitudes. I realized that she wouldn't go for the nudity in this scene. So it was just a simple matter to get her to play a blind person, and since she's playing my grandmother and my grandmother was blind, I had to paint her glasses over. I had to put on two coats of paint. I felt bad about it because I was very proud of my mom that day, she doesn't get out much, and she was interacting with the tekkies and the other actors very sweetly. And here I was doing something every bit as skulky and as cowardly as a 15 year old guy would have done, painting over her glasses and at a cue getting the set cleared so that only two female technicians held lights, and everyone else tip-toed out while my mom knitted happily and blindly away while a couple rolled around in front of her. It was important to do and once I got the notion I couldn't resist. I feel like a total asshole for doing it. How's she supposed to watch the movie now? She genuinely is a prude. It's not like a funny joke that she'll laugh at and say you really got me this time. She'll be deeply hurt and offended. It was part of that unbelievably childish urge I had to do something right under my mother's nose. She's 86 years old for crying out loud.

Q. All of the scenes in the beauty salon have party-goers who are not just hairdressers but hookers as well. Was that a reflection of the world from which your older brother came?

A. Well, we had total access to the beauty salon in the after-hours at all times. My brother was a big man on campus and had many commerce undergraduate parties in the basement that were full of hot commerce babes. Sometimes a busload of nurses would come over. The party would always overflow from the rumpus room in the basement up into the beauty salon. I just remember drunk, beautiful girls getting shampooed by horny teenaged boys and then both of them going under the dryers together and curling each other's hair, and making giant puddles on the floor and rolling around in the dark. It was right on Ellice Avenue, a heavily travelled street, and there were huge, noirish Venetian blinds and the room was full of mirrors, so the car headlights going down the street would bounce off the mirrors and constantly move the venetian blind shadows up and down and wash them all over the place. So you could just see these forms, in various states of dampness, excitedness, illicitness, all sort of fleeting to little egg-headed, brush-cutted, toe-headed Guy.

Q. Those are pretty sexy memories.

A. Yeah, and all those activities excluded me completely because of my age. But somehow when I became the same age my brother was as an undergraduate they still eluded me. Damn it, I haven't been able to have a part in any of those frolics until just now, when I get to shoot the damn things.

Q. You seemed to be having a good time during the shoot?

A. I never really enjoy shooting tremendously but I have to admit I like the sense of mischief that comes from intersecting with your own life and seeing where the ricochets end. Sometimes its true that

authorial intent is nothing but an inexact science. It reminds me the way that Batman, as played by Adam West, used to solve the riddler's riddles. He'd go out on a ledge with each wordplay until he'd reached this most preposterous conclusion, each one based on the fact that a possible premise was 100% correct, and he'd connect this plank of 20 flimsy premises extended one upon the other. So I'm perhaps guilty of doing that in finally interlocking all the refracted characters and finding the original light source in my own life. For instance, for an autobiography it's strange that the most important person in my life – my daughter - isn't even in it. It was later that I realized, and I don't think this is a Batman thing, that the most horrifying thought that I've ever had in my life is that my daughter, who was an unplanned pregnancy, could have been an aborted fetus. I can't think of any more horrifying premise. I realize there's a reason why I've never taken anyone for an abortion and I've never been connected even indirectly to an abortion. That was my connection; I was trying to think of the most ghastly circumstances under which a guy could dump a girl. It was an odd, unconscious opportunity to ignore the most important person in my life but I realized that what makes the whole thing seem so nightmarish for me is the absence of that huge person. The whole movie has sculpted a space around a giant fetus and it's not a stone one, it's a lovely soul. I don't want to sound like one of those self-aggrandising, sensitive men but in the world of Cowards Bend the Knee fathers aren't so great, and I'm not claiming to be a great father. I'm just stating a fact: that I love my daughter. You'll have to ask her if I'm a good father or not. In this way, almost everyone in my life is present in the movie but sometimes by not being present. Once again, I would never ask anyone to decode this or put this on a road map, it's just something that surprises the creator himself.

Q. Without doing too much cartography and road-mapping, what would one do with the relationship between the main character and his father, which is a pretty loaded one, given the fact that your father died when you were young? It's a curious dynamic that has aspects of sexual rivalry, among much else.

A. Once I decided this was a blatant autobiography, I felt lower case "g" godlike and felt that I could bestow gifts on deceased members of my family, gifts of things that they never came close to having in real life. I love my father to this day and he's been dead for 25 years, but he was not a powerful man. He was just ground to dust by life. He would never take a woman away from anybody, he wouldn't think of doing anything rotten and I feel he must have regretted that a lot. I remember travelling with him when I was a teenager (he had one eye by the way and I was a little sorry I couldn't get someone with a glass eye in this movie) and he was ill and wasn't supposed to smoke. I remember waking up in the middle of the night in a hotel room full of smoke. There was just one burning ember of a cigarette visible and I could hear him sobbing. All of a sudden it felt like I was in a Franz Kafka short story: just the sound of my dad sobbing in the dark while killing himself with cigarette smoke. In a way, I just wanted to give him the gift of immense sexual potency and two eyes. There's another father in the film as well. Chas is Meta's father and my father's name was Charles, so my father ends up being kind of split in half. I think Meta's Chas is a truer version of my father. The first movie I ever made, *The Dead Father*, was about a guy who had just had it with his own family. He's sort of dead, so when he's not in the grave, he's living with another family somewhere else, a better family, one that doesn't drive him so crazy, or he's just run away from the one that he was stuck with. I understand that temperament from his point of view and I understand how a child feels. So I know how Meta is reacting because I guess I'm her. That's the strangest thing, I've written an autobiography in which the character played by me, isn't me.

Q. It's a lovely thing to fashion your autobiography in a compensatory way, to use the film to give both a gift to you father and protection to your daughter. Did you realize you were doing that as you were writing the script. Were these planned, or were they serendipities that you discovered subsequent to the writing?

A. I think they were serendipities. I realized later that seemed to be what I was doing, and then they became a little more conscious. There was a planned one that started with my beloved Aunt Lil. She was my second mother and she ran the beauty salon together with my mother. Aunt Lil was a sweet old spinster filled to the brim with equanimity and generosity and auntish love for her nieces and nephews. She didn't have a soiled mark on her record. My mother was far more volatile and unpredictable but my Aunt Lil was the one who died in bed with me not visiting her enough. I was out carousing too much and I always felt bad about that. So I consciously made her a Clytemnestra figure. I thought this is a post-mortem gift I can give to my Aunt Lil, just to give her a brief taste of that life, even if it's only 25 minutes of screen time. Just to know what it was like to run a bordello as well as a beauty salon, to enjoy love affairs, fist fucks and a strangulation, all the things I assume she didn't experience. She was born in the year 1901 and most people say that Aunt Lil's husband died in World War I, namely, she never met him, that by the time she turned 18 all of her potential suitors were buried under poppies in Flander's Fields.

She was a spinster when that word still meant something.

Q. You talked earlier today about the parallel between the wax museum and the waxing of the legs on Tara Birtwhistle, the actor who plays Liliom; were those patterns that you planned or were they recognitions that came afterwards?

A. Once again, I don't know how much to confess to you. But it's fascinating, even to me, to see little echoes popping up in things. I had to name some chapters for the document and I named one of them "A Wax Tryst". Then I realized there was another tryst between Guy and the ghost in a wax museum and I couldn't think of a title for that chapter other than "Another Wax Tryst". I've been feeling kind of waxy myself for most of my life. I can never seem to get a natural reaction on my face. I'm too scared to let my true feelings out. The veneer cracks easily, I tremble at the slightest sound, and I'm given to great periods of inactivity, so I really do belong in a wax museum.

Q. Obviously you not only used the hand as a structural device in the film, but you also use the mirror in the beauty salon as a way of signalling and commenting in the complicated relationships that exist among the characters who are gathered there?

A. The mirrors are tough to film and I've always tried to get them into a film but I've never succeeded. This time it seemed a little simpler just to go with a lot of murk and blur. That way you can't recognize the fact that there are technicians standing in the reflected surfaces. It just gets so complicated that invariably you catch the caterer reflected in the third mirror and you have to cut him in anyway. This time I just threw everything out of focus, or it just serendipitously went out of focus on me. Mirrors, windows, picture frames, all those things are just more interesting to any photographer, and especially someone who's as hooked on closed frames as I am. If given the choice between shooting something through a window or not, I'll shoot it through a window. And what's better than a mirror reflection of a reflection of a reflection. If you took the mirrors out of the beauty salon I grew up in, it would just be a small, rectangular room about the size of a kitchen. But with all those mirrors, it was a cubist expanse of possibility. Of sticky possibility, because everything was coated in hair spray, and if you sat down on something your clothes would tear off. You had to peel yourself off everything and everything would come with hairballs attached. So it was this odd mixture of hard glass surfaces and sticky, wet, organic hair tufts, like divots that Dr. Seuss never replaced. Once Shawna Connor built the space it was fun to step into it for the first time. I had her stick some artifacts from my Aunt Lil's beauty salon - the cash register and some manicure tables from my actual childhood - so I actually did get a small erection and then pass out when I first stepped into the new beauty salon.

Q. You were inadvertently making a snuff film in which you ended up killing yourself.

A. Exactly. I'll probably finally figure that out. There's that Danilo Kis story about a guy who just kept painting the same unrecognizable blobby pattern over and over and then he died of cancer and his doctor identified his paintings as his tumour. Obviously, you and Danilo are thinking along the same lines.

Q . To say you romance the past is a bit of an understatement.

A. I've learned from girlfriends in the past that I have a hunger for nostalgia that can't be kept up with. Maybe a few male friends can, Ian Handford and John Harvey, the old drones. I have a need to sift through the ashes. In the absence of physical evidence, I'll take second or third or fourth-hand accounts of something and soak it like an overused tea bag to get out the slightest nostalgic flavours. So if I give myself permission to make an autobiography where I'm actually trotting out people and things and parading them in front of strangers, I just about faint from giddiness and the Niagara Falls torrent of potential emotion. But I keep it inside because I'm Icelandic. I like to think that everyone has had a tremendously emotion-packed life, like Flannery O'Connor says, whether you like it or not, childhood should be loaded up with all sorts of horrors and wonders. Everyone's childhood is mythic and mine seems to be mythic in a German Romantic way.

Q. It's because you go swimming in a Caspar David Friedrich painting every winter at Gimli.

A. Exactly. When I was seven years old I had a brother who took his own life, but he did it on the grave of his dead girlfriend. That's something someone Kleist knew would do. So when it was explained to me as a seven year old, it was explained in very romantic terms: Cameron has gone to be with Carol and it was sort of a happy story. There were some tears but he's gone where he wants to be and would you like

his bed? It's available now, so I'll tuck you in and we'll wake you in the morning for the viewing. So I went to bed that night with something better than sugar plums dancing in my head, it was graves mounded with flowers, and coffins floating up to heaven to slide into a drawer next to another happy one.

Q. In the film one of the principal cast members is a young woman related to your brother's girlfriend. That was obviously a quite conscious invocation?

A. It was. Amy Stewart is the niece of my brother's dead girlfriend. Our families remained strangely close. I don't know what was in it for the Isaac's, but our family needed to rationalize that Cam had gone to heaven to be with Carol. She'd been already dead for half a year and they may not have wanted someone lying on their daughter's grave, but they were awfully sweet about it. They were people that we knew from the lake and who we saw only in the summer. My brother took his life in the winter and so a number of months passed before we saw the Isaac's again after this strange incident. My Mom and Dad could see Doctor and Mrs. Isaac coming down the street and I guess my Dad did a rapid scan of etiquette and nowhere did he find what are you supposed to do when you meet the parents of the daughter on whose grave your son left himself. So as they approached I can just imagine all four people, both couples, their minds racing, thinking 'what do we say, how do we greet each other?' My Dad, with a stroke of genius at the last second, climbed a tree and swung from one arm like a chimpanzee and yelled, "Me Tarzan, you Jane" to Mrs. Isaac. Then he clamoured down, everyone hugged, and they remained quite close. More than the double deaths of teenage kids that act seemed to marry the two families, to make us in-laws in a sweetly romantic way. So I've known Amy since she was a little girl, she's been acting most of her life, she was a child actor on Road To Avonlea, I've always wanted to use her because she's a friend and because she's good. But I have to admit that when there was a chance to play a ghost I couldn't resist and it made me feel quite mischievous. This one really is a self-indulgent plunge, but having said that maybe I can reverse field for awhile and say that I really did try to take all I've learned so far about filmmaking and make it a real entertainment, knowing that its eventual home would not be the big screen or even home video, but in a gallery. I knew it would be a different kind of entertainment than I'm used to making but it seemed perfect. The kind of editing - and remember your life is all about editing because that's what remembering is - will be determined by the venue in which the stuff will be seen. And that's where I'm anything but self-indulgent. At the time we're speaking it's not edited, and I'm trying my best to convey a strong sense of memory so that other people looking at this thing will feel there's a method to what looks like capricious wanking. Ideally some people will open up enough to say that feels like the way memory works. If you're Marcel Proust you've pulled it off and he did it by accumulating a shelf of books that was almost as long as my original treatment for this thing. I'm trying to do it through editing, performance and self-flagellation.

Q. In this film you shoot the most sexual scenes you've ever attempted. I'm not asking this in a prurient way, but I wonder if these scenes felt different? Did you act differently as a director?

A. My rules for nudity have always been the same as the Hays Office limply enforced in pre-code pictures, before Joe Breen took over and really laid down the laws in 1934 and all sorts of double beds were taken out and twin beds were rolled in. So I've always had the pre-code, loosey-goosey rules in my head: a little bit of nudity as long as it's a long shot, smudged out or overexposed. But the nature of this peephole show seemed to call for something a little less tasteful. When I filmed those pre-code things before, believe it or not, I almost never looked while filming. I told myself I can look while I'm editing and I would politely, childishly, avert my eyes. I never saw more than half the people I filmed naked, depriving myself of all sorts of memories to savour in my dotage. But on this one there was no avoiding it; it took a couple of hours to shoot, so it was different. Melissa Dionisio was pretty good about it. It was while we were watching the rushes we noticed that her nipple looked just like the red spot in the middle of a face-off circle, and that in editing we should have a double exposure of a few men taking a face-off in the middle of her breast.

Q. In your treatment you talk about secret and pornographic moments "so private they beg to be violated by an outsider's gaze", which led me to expect some pretty racy stuff, but in fact the sex scenes are relatively discreet. The scenes of violence end up being much more radical. Was that intentional?

A. I've never really liked sex scenes. Even when they're really erotic it feels like a detour along the way to the end of the story. It almost never fits into the plot naturally. It's almost always something that can be excluded, the way that Ernst Lubitsch showed sex scenes by showing a closed door and a grandfather clock. Those are far more satisfying because you filled in the blanks and you didn't have to

see Herbert Marshall and his wooden leg humping away on someone, you could just imagine it and it would be as polished as a Noel Coward idea, as polished as a monocle. So I thought the only way you could justify them is if they had something to do with the story, and so they're non-sex scenes. There are two with Melissa in which first one person, and then the other, refuses to have sex. So that's better. For me, it's important to show the non-event of sex. As for the violence; after thanking Tara for being such a convincing murder victim, I realized I had shot all these scenes with violence against women. It felt a bit strange. But my fall-back position was, these are peephole movies, and I can even show erections if I want. As a matter of fact, I would probably be wise to up the pornographic quotient, but my life hasn't been that pornographic, actually.

Q. You call it a film noir. Was it a style that came to you naturally because of the subject matter?

A. Film noir is such a stretchy term and it's used so promiscuously now. Most people date film noir back to post-war America where you start seeing disaffected, delusional males who seal their own fate in the opening moments of the movie and then you get to watch them die over the next action-packed minutes. And they're in black and white. My favourite noirs seem to be about a guy and a gal and some quicksand. Even though my life started in 1956, the last gasp days of the golden age of noir and the same year the stone baby should have been born, this story is set in 1930. I should really have set it in 1929, the greatest year in cinema history (some would say the worst): the year of the part-talkie. But I feel it's got a lot of what make true noirs noir. Not the shadows; there's plenty of those in the picture, almost as many as those shot by John Alton, the best noir cinematographer. I like the way he would light a scene with one flashlight and these are Hollywood movies. So it's noir visually and I also think it's noir in spirit. But I use the term very guardedly and I hang an asterisk next to my use of it. I know my picture is not really a noir, but it's closer than L.A. Confidential anyway. It's about a guy and a gal and some quicksand.

Q. What did you learn technically in doing the film? In one way it must have been a fabulous holiday for you because you were able to do what you wanted, but I also assume you set some technical goals for yourself?

A. This felt good being my own teacher. I wasn't a slave to any real obligations. When a bunch of the footage came back blurry, I went great. I didn't have to listen to anyone condemn me as an idiot for forgetting to focus. When a bunch of the footage came back completely overexposed because a light meter in the camera broke, I went great. My friend Steve Snyder pointed out that the actors looked like human light filaments and that excited me no end. And that's my battle cry for the rest of this picture: the human light filaments! I love every one of those shots being five stops overexposed. And besides, didn't Jack Smith's flaming creatures look just as blurry and just as overexposed and just as primitive? And primitivity is the banner under which I work. It was nice; no one even mentioned continuity on the set for the first time since I started making movies. People could tell that it didn't matter, or since I was actually shooting it without story boards, maybe people thought I was delivering continuity. Maybe that's why no one mentioned it. I'd like to think it's because people have finally figured out that I'm fiercely primitive. But it really felt good to get the rushes back and have them look pretty much the way I wanted them to.

Q. You're in the midst of editing Cowards Bend the Knee. Do you have a pretty firm sense about how you want visual memory to operate in the film?

A. I definitely have a strategy but I just don't know how each specific shot will play itself out. I like the way when one remembers something that the memories don't come in evenly-paced chronological order, that they sometimes leapfrog each other. Some are skipped over completely, others are repeated a number of times and savoured, or dreaded, but repeated nonetheless. This is an autobiography and so I'd like it to be edited as remembered, not as told, just sitting in the big comfy chair with the madelaines ready to go, and then you just let yourself travel in that leapfrogging sort of way, with plenty of speed bumps, plenty of sharp turns, and plenty of time along the way to slow down and really languish in some images, and the freedom to slip over others altogether. I'd like the pace to vary, be skittish and repetitive and loopy. I really like the filmmaker Martin Arnold out of Vienna who will take 18 seconds from a Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland film and then stretch it out into 12 or 15 minutes just by looping little gestures until the tiniest of them take on really significant weight and a new narrative comes out of these insignificant fragments from a disposable movie. The way I loop back is similar to Arnold but not as obsessive and I think it has a different goal and a different effect. I want it to work as memory, where he's really forcing you to study things and to fetishize them - like Mickey Rooney's face, until it turns into something more pornographic than a fistfuck. Whereas with my looping and repetition I hope

that it just increases the discomfort on a person's face or asserts itself a bit more until finally something that isn't particularly well shot, just a pair of hands shaking each other in greeting, might suddenly seem more important because its been given a ridiculous amount of time. It's something that really belongs to the realm of experimental filmmakers but I wouldn't be surprised to see it eventually make its way into some mainstream films. Right now those little loops and hiccups and repetitions feel right; they feel as if they should have been a part of movie vocabulary since 1895.

Q. Here's a bit of a confession. On two occasions I found myself entering the spirit of being a voyeur. Obviously on the closed set I was thinking about ways that I could actually spy on the sex scene, less out of interest than because the violation of trust seemed to be the right 'wrong' response. The other time was when Amy first comes into the abortion clinic at the back of the beauty parlour. The set was constructed in such a way that you could see through the cracks in the wall and that's how I watched the filming of that scene. I saw it through a restricted prism. Do you want the viewer/audience member to enter the voyeuristic dance in such a literal way?

A. A certain part of me has grown tired of talk about voyeurism. Whenever someone writes about Rear Window, for example, the word gets used exhaustively and I just feel like saying, 'well, we're all watching the movie, we're all voyeurs, now what?' By the same token I now feel closer to you because as a child I used to crawl up through the hair chute where all the floor sweepings were swept down. There'd be stratas of different colours of hair, mostly different colours of grey, actually. So I'd flip open this little baseboard flap and look out onto the swollen ankles of elderly women lined up under the hair dryers and get a little thrill out of that. And every once in a while my chihuahua would come over and lie down in front of me and I'd have to slide it over. It was almost the same kind of peek that you were getting. Even though peepholes have been done before, I guess the reason I felt it was the right format for this thing is that I have spent many hours in that huge, gaping interrogation between pre-sexual childhood and alleged sexual maturity. I spent a lot of time staring through cracks and drilled holes and keyholes and glueing mirrors to car antennae and sliding them up heating ducts.

Q. Has the making of the film been important to you in emotional ways, other than the obvious feeling of pride that you've made a good film? What about the psychic dimensions of your pleasure?

A. I don't think I've used up my autobiography. Some day I'd like to present another version, as I say, that's just as true and completely different. And maybe another one after that. I hope that each one's as comfortable to make as this one has been. But maybe it will never be as pleasant as running around in a reproduction of your childhood haunts with what looks like a toy camera and getting to play with a bunch of people who don't realize that they're really sick effigies of people that mean so much to me that I could drench their laps with my tears if they looked at me the wrong way.

Q. I can imagine the next version will be the autobiography of a stone baby. It's become an obsession.

A. I am the stone baby. Chicken soup for the stone baby.

Robert Enright was the diarist during the filming of *Cowards Bend the Knee*. He is the film columnist for *Border Crossings* magazine and has written extensively about the work of Guy Maddin. The preceding interview was conducted in Winnipeg on October 28, 2002.

COWARDS BEND THE KNEE

a GUY MADDIN FILM

Cast

Guy Darcy Fehr
Meta Melissa Dionisio
Veronica Amy Stewart
Liliom Tara Birtwhistle
Dr. Fusi Louis Negin
Mo Mott Mike Bell
Shaky David Stuart Evans
Chas Henry Mogatas
Maddin Sr Victor Cowie
Gramma Herdis Maddin
Mrs.Maddi Marion Martin
Baby Aurum McBride
Stickboy Bernard Lesk
Toby Moses

Customers

Erin Hershberg
Erika Rintoul
Charlene Van Buekenhout
Sherrill Hershberg
Kathryn Stuart
Lauren Ritz
Rebecca Sandulak
Kirstin Ward
Billy Dee Knight
Erica Smith

Stylists

Meghan Greenlay
Erin McKenzie
Erin Hershberg

Cops

Steve Burke
Robert Enright
Spencer Maybee
Ian Jorsky
Bradley Jonasson
Mark Yuill

Hockey Players

Ricardo Alms
Craig Aftanas
Jim Crawford
Mike Silver
Bob Unger
Mark Yuill
Caelum Vatnsdal
Matt Holm

Wax Maroons

Richard Orlandini
Don Hewak
Stan Lesk
Ted Avent
Ted Wynne
Ian Jorsky
Dave McDonald

Audience Members

Shauna Evans
Tracey McBride
Rodney LaTourelle
Alex Khizder

Filmmakers

Photographer
Writer & Director
Guy Maddin

Producer
Philip Monk for The Power Plant

Associate Director
Associate D.O.P.
Ruben Guzman

Production Designer
Shawna Conner

Art Director
Craig Aftanas

Decors
Rodney LaTourelle
Brad Jonasson
Shauna Evans
Michael Stecky
Ian Yorsky
Jesse Peterson
Zarah Laszlo
Deb Mosher

Costume Designer
Meg McMillan

Costumers
Erica Smith
Kirstin Ward
Allison Bile
Wendy Speary

Hair Design
Meghan Greenlay

Make-up
Beverley Hamilton

Editor
John Gurdebeke

Production Manager
Tracy McBride

Gaffer
Scott Jaworski
Key Grip
Spencer Maybee

Daily Grip
Shamus Finnegan

Best Boy
Geoff Heath

Stills Photographer
Rebecca Sandulak

Craft Services
Tracy McBride

Diarist
Robert Enright

Production Lab
Exclusive, Toronto

Post-production Lab
MIDCAN, Winnipeg

Catalogue Design
Zab

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