

MEMORABLE MOVIE WATCHING: VIEWER RUMINATIONS ABOUT MEMORY IN FOUR CANADIAN
FILMS AND THEIR IMDB USER REVIEWS

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Abstract

Memorable Movie Watching: Viewer Ruminations About Memory in Four Canadian Films and their IMDb User Reviews

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Memorable Movie Watching: Viewer Ruminations about Memory in Four Canadian Films and their IMDb User Reviews explores how four Canadian films released in the decade around the turn of the millennium tell stories of memory and remembering, and how User Reviewers writing on the IMDb.com engage with, respond to, and re-remember those narratives filtered through their own remembered personal experiences. It embraces a new form of audience research by analyzing films alongside voluntary viewer contributions in order to bring these viewers' voices into the conversation about memory in film and specifically Canadian film.

Lilies (John Greyson, 1996), *The Hanging Garden* (Thom Fitzgerald, 1997), *Marion Bridge* (Wiebke Von Carolsfeld, 2002), and *My Winnipeg* (Guy Maddin, 2007) are each fiction films that focus on the main character's deeply personal childhood memories. A textual analysis of the four films reveals trends in how the filmmakers create memory explorations and memory works [works based on memory] in Canadian film. A further textual and thematic analysis of the IMDb's 117 User Reviews for these four films reveals how viewers engage with what I term memory narratives and the personal memories these films spark.

The four films respectively privilege, through narrative and filmic techniques, each protagonist's telling of remembered childhood events. Yet when User Reviewers of the films comment on the protagonist's remembered childhood events, they choose to contest them, citing the unreliability of the remembered and of memory itself. User Reviewers interrogate the

film narratives against their own personal experience, all the while asserting that there is significance to be found in the process of remembering.

For User Reviewers, this process of remembering involves engaging with the film and then writing about their memories of watching the film and its narrative through their own sparked memories. In this process, they dig for significant meaning even though Users rarely articulate that meaning or specify for whom it is meaningful. In their writing, Users do reveal their own thoughts and beliefs about Canadian film, as well as their knowledge of filmmakers, related texts, Canadian locations, and their own childhood and youth experiences.

Key words

Memory, Remembering, Canadian Film, User generated content, Audience, Viewer, Thom Fitzgerald, John Greyson, Guy Maddin, Wiebke von Carolsfeld

Content Warning

Please note: the memory stories depicted in these films, discussed in the User Reviews and in this dissertation are extremely disturbing and may be upsetting to the reader.

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Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction. Remembering the Viewer Remembering the Film.....	1
Chapter 1. Situating Memory and Locating the Viewer.....	11
Chapter 2. From Shush to Watch Out! Caught Remembering <i>Marion Bridge</i> and <i>The Hanging Garden</i>	52
Chapter 3. Memory: A Tool for Revenge and Escape.....	75
Chapter 4. Engaging in Movie Memories: An Analysis of User Reviews of <i>Marion Bridge</i> , <i>The Hanging Garden</i> , <i>Lilies</i> , and <i>My Winnipeg</i>	97
Chapter 5. Sparking Significant Memories in the Process of Remembering and Writing About Films.....	116
Conclusion. Sparking Memories and Conversations About Movies.....	160
Works Cited	170
Appendix A. IMDb User Reviews of <i>The Hanging Garden</i>	177
Appendix B. IMDb User Reviews of <i>Lilies</i>	191
Appendix C. IMDb User Reviews of <i>Marion Bridge</i>	213
Appendix D. IMDb User Reviews of <i>My Winnipeg</i>	221

Introduction: Remembering the Viewer Remembering the Film

Towards the end of the twentieth century, academics noted a growing interest in all things related to memory, from commemoration to remembering to forgetting. Noting the trend, academics jumped right into the upsurge by researching, reflecting on, and writing about memory and its prevalence. In the year 2000 Susannah Radstone stated that “articles and monographs concerned with memory have flooded scholarly journals and the academic press,” demonstrating an “explosion of interest in memory” (1) and the development of the current “memory boom” (Radstone 9), which she, along with Bill Schwartz, sees as a very “present preoccupation” (Radstone and Schwartz 1). French historian Pierre Nora turned to contagion terminology to describe the rising interest in memory, calling it an “outbreak” (4), and Jeffrey Olick similarly likened the growth to a cancer, referring to it as “metastatic” (Olick 26). Astrid Erll goes into further detail, writing that “both the practice of remembering and the reflection on that practice have become an all-encompassing sociocultural, interdisciplinary, and international phenomenon” (1) and notes the “flood of commemorative ceremonies, memory controversies, and writings on memory” that constitute “a transnational phenomenon” (4). Paul Antze, expanding on Erll’s concept of memory space, writes that “We live in a time when memory has entered public discourse to an unprecedented degree. Memory is invoked to heal, to blame, to legitimate” (vii). At the end of the twentieth century and turn of the new millennium, ideas about memory were exploding across platforms, disciplines, and physical and mental borders. Olick explores this rise in detail in his article “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” in which he shows that the rise of interest in all things memory related began in the late nineteenth century and

continued to grow through the twentieth century. Given the increasing awareness of social memory and ultimately collective memory across several disciplines, the value of memory as a source of deeper understandings of the human condition seemed boundless.

Four English–language feature films produced in Canada during this memory boom period were caught up in this phenomenon. *Lilies* (John Greyson, 1996), *The Hanging Garden* (Thom Fitzgerald, 1997), *Marion Bridge* (Wiebke von Carolsfeld, 2002), and *My Winnipeg* (Guy Maddin, 2007) depict stories of adult protagonists recalling and retelling memories of their childhoods. These memories fall into the category of “vital memories,” defined by Stephen Brown and Paula Reavey as those “recollected events [that] are crucial to a sense of self to such a degree that they can come to appear as defining features of life” (329). As protagonists re–engage with and recollect these past events, they attempt to make sense of and find meaning in the memories that haunt them, but complete resolution eludes them to the extent that they remain haunted. They are trapped, constantly trying to re–engage in acts of remembering in order to assert some understanding or agency over what actually happened in the past, to find what it holds. Protagonists in each of these films explore and narrate their difficult childhood memory or memories in order to assert control over the effect their past has on their present and future.

Even though the films are structured to privilege the protagonist’s perspective, when User Reviewers on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb, IMDb.com) create their own memory texts based on their very real experience of engaging with these films and the stories told in them, they challenge the perspective of the protagonists in their writing. In fact, User Reviewers contest, dispute, and question the memories of the protagonists, as these are no longer the

memories of the film characters, but are now memories of film watching — an event that viewers are now making sense of through their own experiences, their own memories. While all User Reviews on the IMDb.com could be considered memories of engaging with films, for the purposes of this dissertation the films being examined are about memories and the act of remembering so that a pattern of remembering can emerge from characters who remember, in films about remembering, that in turn spark memories in User Reviewers who remember.

The purpose of this dissertation is to consider how these four Canadian English Language feature films tell their protagonists' memories of difficult childhood experiences, and how User Reviewers on the IMDb.com engage with these film memories. The goal is to broaden the discussion around these Canadian films beyond the texts alone, by bringing the viewer into the conversation about their engagement with the film. In considering and valuing the viewer's perspective on the film, this dissertation topples the idea that a film has a single correct reading in order to examine both how the film narrates the story and how the viewer responds to it. To do this I begin with exploring how memory is narrated in each of the films. It is followed by a textual analysis of every IMDb User Review written about these films to determine how viewers engage with and write about their experience with the memories depicted in the film in relation to and entangled with their own personal memories. The process undertaken to achieve this goal in many ways aligns with Joke Hermes's suggestions about the future needs of audience researchers. In seeking to understand how viewers engage with film memory and share that engagement on the IMDb, this dissertation falls under what Hermes calls "Civic research" or a shared responsibility to "work with and on behalf of media users" (83). While, as will be explained shortly, this dissertation does not consider User Reviewers an audience but

rather as individual viewers, this research does embrace Hermes's description of good audience research:

A good audience researcher knows how to listen. She takes horrifyingly conservative or insulting remarks of informants in stride with the more palatable. She does not care that she is offered a world view in bits and pieces that appear entirely unrelated. She takes all of it seriously. She reconstructs how the world, via and in the media, becomes meaningful to others. To do audience research is to take up a social and moral responsibility to understand what makes life worthwhile for others, including those who do not have the habit to come up with political agendas or world views. (83)

This dissertation seeks without bias or judgment to thoroughly explore hundreds of reviews of the four films, to consider how the memory narratives they tell become meaningful to each User Reviewer, and to explain how User Reviewers create further meaning in writing their own memories of watching. The goal is not to determine whether Users mis-interpret the films but to understand how they engage in the conversation that the films begin. By analyzing these Users documents as texts co-created alongside the films, this dissertation works to level the traditional hierarchy which places the skilled and educated film critic above the viewer. This process meets Hermes's challenge to develop a methodology to understand viewer experience, interpretations, and understandings.

The 'civic research' process for this dissertation begins with intense viewing in addition to listening. To conduct this research, I will carefully examine each of the four films to understand how the memory tales and works are constructed as well as what narrative and film techniques are being utilized to privilege the telling of the protagonist's difficult childhood memories. This

textual analysis of each film will be situated within the context of Canadian cinema and memory studies in an effort to explore how the films shape the memory tales they tell. In addition to the film and related literature texts, I will conduct a textual analysis of each of the hundreds of User Reviews to consider how viewers respond to the memories being told in the films, how they react to the films as Canadian films, and how each viewer wrote about their own memories that the films sparked. This methodology is a new and very accessible way of bringing audiences of one back into the analysis of films and their reception.

This dissertation will further argue that User Reviewers form a valuable source of relatively anonymous data about how films are watched, discussed, and interpreted. The sample group of over one hundred contributors contains no confirmable personal information. The contributors have not been asked a research question, but their comments are assumed to be the writers' own self-motivated words and thoughts, resulting in a text that can be analyzed to understand how and why these viewers engage with film and the memories told in these films. This is a new and highly accessible form of audience research that does not rely on potentially misleading or bias-provoking survey questions but welcomes User writings as texts no different than any other publication in the public domain. This dissertation adds to the slowly growing body of research exploring IMDb User Reviews and extends it to consider more than just User choice metrics. For the first time, this dissertation explores the User Reviewers' very personal and individual experiences with the film, their memories of film-watching, and the personal memories the film and watching it sparked.

For Joke Hermes, the ultimate goal of this new audience research is to explore what makes life meaningful. The process of close textual analysis of the films and User Reviews together

with a consideration of User Reviews as useful viewer data show four key findings that replicate across the films and reviews as well as validate the methods used.

The first finding is that there are viewers of English Canadian films who recognize the industry's status as a marginal cinema, its auteurs, and recurring themes and styles. As will be explored in the literature review in Chapter 1, Canadian film is often written about by academics and historians as a national cinema plagued by challenges of funding and distribution. That narrative persists through User Reviews of all four films. However, the narrative is also contradicted by the Users' own activities. While Canadian films may not have wide distribution in Canada, there are viewers watching and writing about Canadian films. These viewers, who may be anywhere in the world, are not only interested in Canadian films, but they write about films from Canada in a way that clearly indicates some degree of knowledge of how Canadian cinema has been positioned as a forum for exploring, responding to, and discussing what it means to be Canadian, resulting in a conversation that both supports and challenges the official idea of what it means to be Canadian.

Writing about Canadian films as a medium for interpretation and furthering discussion about the film's content is potentially part of the reason for the second finding of this dissertation. The second finding is that memories can be told and understood from many different perspectives. Each of the films in this dissertation privileges the protagonist's telling of their memory tale or work, even in the face of fellow characters who dispute it. However, when User Reviewers write about the film's memory story, they do not privilege the protagonist's recalling of past events. Instead, they question and contest the memory stories that Guy, Simon, Agnes, and Sweet William tell. User Reviewers show that, in their estimation, the

memory narratives that the films privilege have some factual errors, and that sometimes the rememberer's memory is not to be trusted. Ironically, Users make these claims by relying on their own potentially equally questionable memories as evidence. Still, User Reviewers do not completely dispel the protagonist's memories. Instead, they seem to agree with French historian Pierre Nora's assertion that "the past has ceased to have a single meaning and that a present that is overlaid with an awareness of its own history necessarily allows for several possible versions of the past" (6). The films exist as static texts, but when Users engage with them, these Users respond with limitless perspectives, even multiple perspectives through different viewings. The User Reviews of these four films show that memory and remembering allow for the past to be recalled differently and yet with equal validity every time, even if the protagonist's telling was at times measured invalid.

Despite the User Reviewers' explanation that various versions of the past are possible, the third finding of this research is that User Reviewers consistently demonstrate, through their writing, a belief that there is meaning in memory and that meaning can be discovered through the process of remembering. Similar to Sweet William's and Agnes's narrative desire to release themselves from their difficult memories by asserting narrative control over them, or to Simon's and Guy's filmic quest to seek revenge and escape from theirs, User Reviewers find that the films spark the act of remembering, inspiring them to write of finding meaning through the process of engaging with the film, as well as writing about their memories of both the film and their own experiences with it. The analysis of the 117 User Reviews of these films showed over and over again that User's memories are sparked. For the purposes of this dissertation "sparking" a memory is the process by which the User Reviewer's memories catch fire or light

up in the process of thinking about the film they have engaged with. Just as a sparkler lights from the base by the handle and proceeds to shoot off sprays of fire in random directions, User Reviewers write of their remembering process in unpredictable, spontaneous, and catching ways, all connected to the film. Each of these sparks illuminates some facet of the User Reviewers thinking about the film and the memories that catch fire in their minds.

User Reviewers tend to include discussions of their memories of film watching, their memories about the film's director and location, and ultimately interpreting the films through their own personal experiences. While User Reviewers state that this process reveals universal meanings and significance, they don't actually state what that meaning is. Based on this research, for User Reviewers, meaning in memory exists somewhere between the film and the viewer's memories of it when filtered through personal experience and written about in the present.

The final finding of this dissertation is that the process of textual analysis of both primary texts and User Reviews reveals patterns about how the primary text is engaged with and further understanding of the beliefs of the Users as related to the primary text's themes and content. This final finding matters because, just as academics and theorists have been driven to explore memory as a topic, and filmmakers have been inspired to tell memory stories, viewers are inspired by films and film-watching to write their own memories.

Chapter Outline

The purpose of Chapters 2 and 3 within the larger dissertation is to establish how memories are told by the four films using both narrative conventions and filmic techniques. Foregrounding the importance of memory in the telling of the stories, these films position the viewer to be in a

space of memory when they come to write their reviews, even if those User Reviews do not remember the film with an impossible eidetic accuracy.

Chapter 2 is a textual analysis of *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* that explores the theme of memory. Both films portray an adult returning to their home and exploring the “vital childhood memories” that haunt them. In exploring and re-remembering what happened to their teenage selves, both characters seek to assert control over how their memories are narrated, even though they must do so in constant negotiation with their families who share the memories in question. However, in both cases the films privilege the memories of the protagonists.

Chapter 3 is a close textual analysis of *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg* that focuses on the theme of memory. In this case, Simon and Guy are not returning home to remember their adolescent selves, but instead they are creating fully produced *memory works* in order to facilitate revenge in Simon’s case and escape in Guy’s. These protagonists do not negotiate for their version of the past, but instead they persuade both themselves and other characters in the film.

Chapter 4 consolidates the foregoing textual analysis into an exploration of how viewers write about the memory stories told in the films. Again, using a close textual analysis, this chapter explores how viewers have responded differently to the memory explorations in *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* and the memory texts presented in *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg*. Based on the information in these User Reviews, User Reviewers question and contest the films about exploring childhood memory (*The Hanging Garden* and *Marion Bridge*) while they do not consistently contest the *memory works*.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus from the film's representations of memory to a close textual analysis of User Reviews to consider how the viewers write about their memories of film-watching, and the personal memories the film narratives and film watching spark. Based on this analysis, watching *Lilies*, *Marion Bridge*, *My Winnipeg*, and *The Hanging Garden* sparks memories of the viewers' own childhoods, their knowledge of place, religion, Canada, and Canadian film history. Finally, a close textual analysis of all reviews reveals a consistent trend in User Reviewers' beliefs about memory: that despite its highly contested and highly unreliable nature, User Reviews contain meaningful and personal significance if they can only be distilled through watching, sparking personal memories, and interpreting both.

Chapter 1: Situating Memory and Locating the Viewer

In this Chapter I will situate the dissertation in relation to current research areas that inform and intersect with it. These areas include Canadian film history, memory studies, film and digital memory studies, collective memory studies, and research based on Users and the IMDb.

The Films

Marion Bridge, *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, and *My Winnipeg* are all what Astrid Erll describes as “Memory Reflexive” Films or films that “address concepts of memory and problematize imaginatively realized acts of individual and collective remembering” (137). Each film tells the story of an adult choosing to return or returning home to remember childhood events that have been haunting them. The four films were produced within an eleven-year period spanning the turn of the twentieth century, a period of intense cultural and academic focus on remembering.

Please note: the memory stories depicted in these films, discussed in the User Reviews and in this dissertation are extremely disturbing and may be upsetting to the reader.

Marion Bridge is based on a play by the same name by playwright Daniel McIvor, who also wrote the screenplay. The film tells the story of Agnes, who returns home to be with her dying mother. Her return comes after more than a decade-long absence and on the heels of a decision to quit drinking after a lengthy battle with alcoholism. The film follows Agnes as she re-engages with her sisters in their cluttered childhood home. Agnes fills her newly sober days by watching an adolescent shop girl in a craftshop and tidying her childhood home. Both acts stir up memories of her childhood. The film uses no flashbacks, instead relying on dialogue to reveal memories of past incidents. The young woman, Joanie, is Agnes’s daughter—the child

she had after her father raped her when she was a teenager. When Agnes's mother dies, she and her sisters, with the reluctant support of Joanie's adoptive mother, begin a friendship with Joanie. They do so on the condition that Joanie is not told of their biological relationship. The film ends with the three sisters, Joanie, and her adoptive mother enjoying a picnic on the beach. The happy scene is thwarted by the knowledge that not all of the ghosts have been laid to rest, as Joanie still does not know who her mother and father are. Joanie's parentage is one significant aspect of the play that was changed by MacIvor and Von Carolsfeld for the film. In the play, Joanie's father is unknown. The incest storyline is created for the filmic version. This adaptation choice stresses this aspect of the storyline, but most of the reviewers don't mention incest in any way, despite the fact that it is the key piece of information the film offers for understanding Agnes's choices.

Thom Fitzgerald's *The Hanging Garden* follows the return of the adult Sweet William to his family home for the wedding of his sister to his childhood lover. Sweet William has been away for nearly a decade, and his return prompts memories of his childhood in the family's disheveled garden. Images of Sweet William being attacked by his father as a young child play out as the body of his adolescent self hangs from a tree. These flashbacks appear for several characters, challenging cinematic codes by allowing the images to appear as diegetic rather than extraneous to the real time of the film. The memories, which appear to haunt in the present tense, culminate with a flashback of the adult Sweet William recalling his mother's discovery of his same-sex attraction and her forcing him to have sex with a prostitute. The cathartic result of this memory recall is that Violet, another unplaced character, is discovered to be Sweet William's child by that prostitute. The film ends with two departures: the first of

Sweet William's mother, who simply walks away from the house, and the second of Sweet William and Violet driving away in the car he arrived in, this time with the car's top down. While Sweet William appears to escape his difficult memories, Violet, a living ghost of them, will remain with him.

Rather than returning home and rediscovering childhood ghosts, the protagonist in *Lilies* creates a play about the events from his tragic adolescence. *Lilies* was shot in Montreal and is based on the play *Les Fueillettes* by Quebec playwright Michel Marc Bouchard, who also wrote the screenplay of the film. *Lilies* is the story of Simon, who has, at the opening of the film, spent forty years in prison for a murder he did not commit. From within the prison Simon has summoned his childhood accuser, the now Bishop Bilodeau, to hear his confession, which takes the form of a play that has been mounted and staged inside the prison chapel. This play, however, is not a confession of Simon's guilt, but asserts his innocence through narrating past memories in order to procure a confession from the bishop. Using fellow inmates as actors, Simon recreates his childhood town of Robertville and tells the story of the months preceding the death of his lover Valier. The play shows that it was not Simon who left Valier to burn in the schoolhouse on that terrible night, but Bilodeau, who then lied about leaving Valier behind to die. The teenage Simon, with his tendency towards arson, was left to take the fall based on his reputation and Bilodeau's word. While the play is set within the prison walls, the film moves through the roof of the confessional box in a constructed memory flashback that Bilodeau and Simon share. The two travel across time and space to the actual town of Robertville, still inhabited by the prisoner actors. The film ends back in the present of the prison with Bilodeau admitting his crime. No indication is given of Simon's vindication.

Similar to how Greyson uses theatre within film to tell Simon's story, Guy Maddin makes use of innovative genre and stylistic choices to tell the story of *My Winnipeg*. Although *My Winnipeg* was funded largely by the Documentary Channel, Madden refers to the film as a 'docu-fantasia,' which is a mix of factually based and fantasy-based story. The film opens with Guy half asleep and stuck on a train, trying to get out of Winnipeg, a quest he can never seem to complete. In an effort to make the break this time, Guy is travelling across the city of Winnipeg, exploring just what has him so stuck there. The episodic and dream-like film covers major sites of Guy's childhood, from the pool he swam in, to the change room he experimented in, to the hockey rink his father worked in, to his childhood home which he has rented out for the filming. The fictional documentarist of the film has hired actors and his mother to re-enact scenes of his childhood, in hopes that re-examining these scripted and acted-out memories will give him some insight into his imprisonment in Winnipeg. The film ends without resolving whether or not Guy gets out of his Winnipeg.

All four films explored in this dissertation are Canadian English language feature films. The decision to include only English language films from a country that also produces films in French and Indigenous languages is based on the fact that the IMDb did not make their site available in languages other than English until 2008, a full year after the last film considered in this dissertation was released. Until 2008, films could not be reviewed in any language other than English. Furthermore, it was not until 2010 that the IMDb added a Graphic User Interface to its site that allowed Users to select a language of use that would automatically translate all of the site material automatically. Until these two key dates, access was limited to those who could read and write in English.

Several other English–language Canadian feature films that depict memory were produced during this period, pointing again to increased interest in memory. However, these films do not depict the singular perspective of a protagonist returning to their childhood home to rediscover their challenging childhood experiences amidst their family, or a protagonist producing their own memory text in the film in order to escape from the grip of their challenging childhood, as the films that are the focus of this dissertation do. In Lynne Stopkewich’s film *Suspicious River* (2000), protagonist Leila (Molly Parker) has a series of memories sparked through self–motivated actions, but she does not return home or control the telling of those memories in a production within the film. She also does not recall these memories with her family or have to negotiate their validity with her siblings or parents who were entwined in events that lead to her memories. Leila explores her memories alone. At the time of writing there are 16 User Reviews of *Suspicious River* on the IMDb. A preliminary review of these texts showed that User Reviewers of the film do not discuss Leila’s recollections as memories, but rather other story lines, so the pattern of a memory film sparking memory discussions is not present and is not helpful to this research.

Atom Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter* (1998) shows protagonist Mitchell Stephens (Ian Holm) recalling childhood memories, but rather than his own memories, they are those of his own child and himself as a parent. Mitchell does not have to negotiate these memories with his family, as they are not in any way related to them. Similarly, Robert Lepage’s *Possible Worlds* (2000) depicts individual’s memories but through the minds of several others rather than having a single character remember past events.

Another film produced in this period that involves shared memories is Barbara Willis Sweete's *Perfect Pie* (2002) which depicts the memory of a friendship where multiple characters are part of the recall in the present. The memories of Marie Beck (Barbara Williams) and Patsy Willets (Wendy Crewson) are shown in flashbacks and do not privilege the memories of one character over the other as the four films discussed in this dissertation do. At the time of writing there are 7 User Reviews on the IMDb for *Perfect Pie*. These reviews, like the film, write of the shared memories of the old friends that are accepted as reliable accounts of an agreed upon historical account, which is quite different from the pattern found in the four films discussed in this research. In the films and reviews explored in this thesis memories are open to interpretation and multiple perspectives. The difference in how memories are discussed in *Perfect Pie* is consistent but could also be affected by the rather small number of User Reviews of the film.

Ararat (Egoyan, 2002) depicts the making of a memory text within a film, a retelling of the Armenian Holocaust, but unlike the films discussed in this dissertation, this is not one individual's memory being retold through a film about the making of a film but rather memories that are part of a large collective historical past. While *My Winnipeg* does depict some collective historical past that might have occurred, these events are not the focus of the film and are accompanied by a great deal of fictitious history with no possible collective to recall them. At the time of writing there are 215 User Reviews of *Ararat* many of which do discuss memory of the Armenian holocaust and how the film remembers it. However, the event being remembered can be historically researched and confirmed, and there are very real offscreen ways in which the events were experienced. Thus, this film and its User Reviews do

not provide appropriate material for my study of personal memory-making in film and the intimate and private responses sparked by those memories in User Reviews.

The four films discussed in this dissertation all privilege a single telling of the past, whether through a film within a film, a play within a film, or through a single character returning home and remembering childhood experiences that are privileged by the film, even as other characters contest their memories. The focus of these four films on a protagonist remembering creates the perfect narrative base for then exploring the very memories of individuals who go on to create their own memory of their experiences of the films on the IMDb.

Why Canadian Film?

These four films were produced and filmed in Canada, star Canadian actors, and were directed by Canadian citizens. Additionally, these films and User Reviews of them are part of a tradition of film production, national remembering, and discussion that has deep roots in Canadian film culture and policy. This dissertation will demonstrate that while film distribution and access has long been a challenge for the Canadian film industry, there are in fact Canadian film viewers and fans who take the time to engage with and review Canadian films on the IMDb; they just don't necessarily live in Canada. However, a close textual analysis of the User Reviews written about watching and remembering these four Canadian films shows that these viewers are highly aware of the intricacies of Canadian film history, from its early documentary days through its attempts to launch a viable feature film industry. Furthermore, how User Reviewers respond to the films also has roots in Canadian film distribution, where audiences were encouraged to discuss the film's content after viewing with the help of a moderator.

The growth and development of film in Canada has been described in terms of one obstructing issue after another. In fact, Jim Leach begins his book *Film in Canada* (2006) with a comprehensive list of problems the Canadian film industry has faced. According to Leach, Canadian film has struggled under Hollywood's domination, with two official languages resulting in two national cinemas, with ethnic diversity, with a lack of distribution options and audience, and with its struggles to compete in a global market (2). Leach's list is ominous but incomplete. Canadian film is written about people living in Canada having been bolstered and marred by never-ending funding policies that cannot decide between situating films as high culture, as for the education of strong citizens, and as profitable.

The Canadian government has been aware of these issues for over a century. Michael Dorland notes in *The Cultural Industries in Canada: Problems, Policies and Prospects* that Canada got involved in culture in the 1920s because of "culture's amenability to manipulations by state policy" (x). The idea of creating cultural policies that could control a film industry, making it profitable and also able to manipulate citizens, leads to one of the challenges that Canadian film has faced. The tension is between edifying high culture on one hand and economically viable mass entertainment on the other. Both Ryan Edwardson in his book *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* and Ted Madger in his *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films* write of the tension between high and low culture as also being the tension between nationhood and an economically productive industry. Edwardson writes of policies to support an economically viable film and television industry in Canada, explaining that "quantitative Canadian content regulations, then, paradoxically contributed to fostering a qualitative sense of Canadianness within the television sector,

although low–budget and amateur are not qualities with which many people would wish to identify” (227). In other words, requiring television networks to show a percentage of Canadian productions meant productions were being made quickly, cheaply, and en–masse. The resulting productions spread the message that Canadian film and television were low–quality. On the other hand, Madger explores Vincent Massey’s push for high culture. According to Madger, Massey felt that “culture must be preserved from everything mass – especially US mass.” Instead Massey’s assertions opposed the idea that “Canadian cultural policy would very much reflect the economic priorities of the Canadian state” (Madger 147). As Zoe Druick summed up the reach of cultural policy in her book *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*, “Canada is an unsurpassed producer of documentary and of cultural policy” (3). The tension between high cultural production and money–making movies is reflected in how reviewers write about the four films discussed.

How reviewers write of these four films reflects how Canadian film has also struggled to be a viable industry in spite of the pervasiveness of Hollywood. Documentary is one way in which the Canadian film industry has been guided by government policy to distinguish itself from Hollywood. Along with fighting to survive amidst competing government policies, the Canadian film industry has historically fought to develop its voice and image despite the global film powerhouse south of the border, and this distinction has also been part of Canadian cultural policy. As Michael Dorland explains, “the state took on the role of pursuing a culture that demarcates Canada from the US” (ix). That culture was to be a high culture, and feature films were not high culture. As Madger states, it was not just Hollywood that caused a lack of feature films in Canada. There was a lack of interest, a film industry that regarded features as

“frivolous” or “culturally deleterious,” and finally a “focus on continentalism for economic reasons that supported Hollywood’s presence in Canada” (87). Films were being made in Canada, but they were not Canadian films – just Canadian landscapes used in Hollywood productions. George Melnyk notes in his book *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* that as early as 1920, director Allan Dawn stated that “what Canada had to offer silent film was location” (36).

However, this was not Canadian life. Druick writes that “Images of Canadian life on film are rare as the screens are dominated by the US” (14). This rarity shifted with the realization that films could be used as celluloid advertisements for everyone from investors to voters and wayward teens. Druick also wrote about the policy goals of using film to educate trade partners and Canadians about the resources and possibilities in Canada (32). This shift acknowledged the existence of an audience for Canadian film, an audience that might be shaped and affected by film. In fact, the National Film Act 1950 also included mandates to use film to affect audiences. This time, films were to be developed to “interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations” (Druick 91). Madger writes about the mandate of the National Film Board (NFB) to organize, centralize, and distribute government film as a “powerful instrument of government propaganda policy” (51).

The goal of using film as propaganda to share Canada with Canadians and the world may have been born out of policy, but critics took up the discussion too. Peter Morris explains, in his article “In Our Own Eyes: The Canonization of Canadian Film,” that “Critical assumptions . . . shaped the canon.” These assumptions included the pleasures of recognition of home and ourselves (32) and a nationalist assumption that Canadian films should “speak to and from the

Canadian milieu” (33). This milieu was not just about advertising a landscape, but also about showing Canadians how to be good citizens — another mandate that recognized an audience for Canadian film. As Druick writes, “the NFB presents an excellent site for reading narratives of ideal citizenship, strategies of government in the Canadian welfare state” (23) and “the vision of Canada promoted by government realism: typical yet anonymous people and places crafted into allegories of citizen and nation building” (98). These NFB films, Druick explains, emphasized the similarities of all peoples regardless of superficial difference, as “in all of these documentary dramas a single story stood in for typical cases and statistical norms, and voice-over narrators helped to anchor the ambivalence of the stories in dominant readings” (Druick 124). For Christopher Gittings, this use of film to represent the nation is a burden. He muses in his book *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, Difference, and Representation* that Canadian cinema struggles with “the ongoing contested receptions of Canadian cinemas to help shape our understanding of the nation and its cinematic production of self” (6). In writing of this burden, Gittings also illustrates the need to remember how Canadian cinema evolved alongside the nation. While this dissertation will not show that Canadian film has a particular focus on memory, or a particular Canadian memory, it will show that User Reviewer writers have an awareness of how Canadian film has evolved, perhaps because Canadian film historians and theorists such as Gittings, Madger, and Leach, write a great deal about that evolution.

This burden Gittings writes of also includes educating citizens on personal matters, again recognizing a persuadable audience for Canadian film and in this case one that needed to be taught about highly personal matters. Druick notes that the NFB began making films about stages of childhood, adolescent health and sexuality, and sexual freedom that emphasized the

problems for young women hoping to be wives if they worked or engaged in sex (122), and films about teens resisting growing into adulthood (123–4). In both cases, the films showed the right path for the audience to follow should they be tempted into pre-marital sex or perpetual adolescence.

In addition to propaganda, Canadian Film has also been used as a vehicle for official remembering. In his article “Our stories live on: The Digitization of Memory at the National Film Board of Canada,” Morgan Charles demonstrates how the NFB became the “official purveyor of Canada’s ‘living memory’” (1). In this role, Charles argues that “the NFB presents itself and a particular vision of Canadian identity through the mobilization of “our stories,” and their framing” (3). Alongside each other, Charles and Druick show that Canadian film, through its roots at the NFB, has been a vehicle for showing ourselves to ourselves (ourselves being “Canadians”), discussing ourselves in relation to film versions of ourselves, and remembering our stories or at least someone’s stories.

Whether persuading investors to use Canadian resources, educating citizens towards a uniform ideal citizenship, or saving young mothers-to-be, each of these policy goals assumes an audience for Canadian film. However, Canadian film continued to be written about as an artform without audience appeal. Leach writes that “Hollywood films have audience appeal – Canadian film does not” (3). However, he also writes that “many Canadian films are unjustly neglected” (6).

This dissertation will show that User Reviewers are aware of how Canadian film has been narrated through policy and culture. Users write about the films they review in this context, but they also contest the familiar narrative by writing against the idea that Canadian

film is inaccessible art film or low budget and poorly made film. Users write about Canadian films on their own terms and in ways that go beyond how it has been stereotyped and narrated in the past.

Viewers of Canadian Film

This dissertation asserts that while there may not be an audience for Canadian film, there are viewers of Canadian films. These viewers engage with *Marion Bridge*, *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, and *My Winnipeg* as Canadian films, even writing about the very Canadianess of these films in their reviews. They write about their memories of the films alongside their memories of the Canadian film industry. Although the 117 viewers of these films cannot be accurately identified as Canadian or as of any other nationality, a textual analysis of their IMDb User Reviews reveals their knowledge about Canadian locations, auteurs, and Canadian film style – what Morris calls “unique characteristics of Canadian cinema rooted in observational style of documentary” (Morris 36).

That User Reviewers engage in a discourse about their experiences of watching Canadian film and the memories these films elicit has a precedent in Canadian film exhibition history. In addition to a tradition of using film to attempt to manipulate audiences, some NFB rural film circuits went so far as to engage their audiences in facilitated discussions about the films, showing audiences how to engage with the material and encouraging the group of viewers to respond to what they saw under the guidance of a trained discussion leader. While these conversations were about discussing what the viewers saw in the films with the goal of education, they also set a precedent that films were to be engaged with and discussed. This

dissertation will show that that approach to reflecting on and responding to films continues in forums such as IMDb User Reviews.

The discussion leader was also required to send reports of the discussions back to the NFB to monitor what was said (Druick 84). According to Madger, “Canadian cultural policy has failed to establish the conditions for shared cultural expression among Canadians, has failed to build a communicative space that reflects and articulates a dramatic sense of Canada as a nation” (Madger 233). This dissertation will show that there is an understanding of a shared cultural expression around Canadian film that has in fact been shaped by those policies that have been accused of “failing” the industry.

This dissertation will explore another iteration of the conversation about Canadian films by examining the voluntary contributions of User Reviewers who resist the idea that Canadian film has been marginalized in their choice to write about it.

The Films: *Lilies*

There are certainly common themes in how the films in this dissertation are written about by academics, with the exception of *Marion Bridge* (2002), which has not been the focus of a critical article. The other three films, however, are written about as films about memory, by recognized Canadian auteur filmmakers, but also as queer films by queer filmmakers, and in the case of *Lilies* as a queer adaptation.

Lilies (1996) is an adaptation of Michel Marc Bouchard’s play *Les Feluettes ou La Répétition D'un Drame Romantique*. Bouchard, a Quebecois writer and actor, was also involved in the writing of the film. Lawrence Howe writes about *Lilies* as an adaptation in his article “The Epistemology of Adaptation in John Greyson’s *Lilies*.” Howe explores Greyson’s success in

expanding upon the play's conventions "by emphasizing the intertextuality of the film, which combines the radical practices of gay theater with the nostalgic work of Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. The result of this striking combination is an analysis of hetero-normativity which has escaped the majority of critics" (44). Keren Zainotz and Paul Halferty interviewed Greyson about his adaptation. In the interview, Greyson spoke about the play, saying:

On stage, the play was very theatrical and very self-consciously located on a stage, which meant the audience had to imagine the mythic landscape of Lac Saint-Jean. On screen, we could lift off the confessional roof and suddenly have a balloon fly through a blue sky and over the real, glittering Lac Saint-Jean. On screen we could actually go to Roberval and make it into the magical, mystical place that Michel Marc describes. (187)

Greyson spoke about the freedom of space offered by the screen, but André Loiselle writes extensively about the adaptation in his book *Stage-Bound: Feature Film Adaptations of Canadian and Québécois Drama* stating that theatre-to-film adaptations like *Lilies* "demonstrate that the adaptations' predilection for remaining anchored to the stage is actually crucial to our understanding of the relationship between the original and the screen version" (3-4). Loiselle explores this relationship between stage and screen in *Lilies* via the film's use of a live actor to play a corpse and the consistently all-male cast, even within flashback scenes.

Memory and flashback have also been the subject of scholarly work related to *Lilies*. Both Howe and Shannon Brownlee write about Greyson's unique use of flashbacks, or, as Brownlee calls them, 're-enactments' (4). In fact, whether or not the film contains flashbacks at all is discussed by several scholars reflecting on *Lilies*. Howe writes that the final scene, where

the Bishop is telling his part in Vallier's death, is a conventional flashback signaled in part by the voice-over" (54–55). However, Brownlee, in her article "But...It's So Beautiful: Fantasy in Lilies and Les Feluettes" disagrees, stating

This begs the question, though, of why the performers in the 'conventional flashback' motivated by the bishop's confession are those we have seen throughout the film...The use of the same location sets presents less of a problem to the literal-minded, since we could imagine that these represent the older Simon's and Bilodeau's shared memories of these spaces. (16)

Brownlee also writes "the performers are the same in both registers because the story of Simon and the bishop's youth is represented through re-enactment rather than flashback" (4). She goes on to explain that Greyson himself reinforced this assertion in an unpublished conversation with her.

Kass Banning joins the conversation about the film's flashback/re-enactments in her chapter "'Strike a Pose': Notes Towards Queering Tableau and Temporality in the Work of John Greyson." Banning aligns with Brownlee, writing, "This is no mere memory flashback. The events of 1912 are re-enacted/performed" (199). And Zainotz and Halferty write that in their interview with Greyson he called these moments in the film "fantastical hallucination" (187). For the purposes of this dissertation, what is important is how these remembered events are controlled and constructed by Simon in an effort to spark specific memories for the Bishop — something the film depicts blatantly when the Bishop and Simon enter the flashbacks together.

Several film theorists move beyond discussing whether or not these past scenes are flashbacks or re-enactments to discuss how memory functions in the film. Jason Morgan writes extensively about the film's innovative portrayal of memory:

Lilies illustrates the literal re-enactment of memory using a theatrical metaphor to highlight its performative value; the bodies of the actors stand as the mediating field on which it is articulated. Importantly here, history is memory in drag, a performance that seeks to undermine the pretenses that history has as being something which is concretely knowable, and which may consequently serve as the stable foundation for a model of national identity. (4)

That Greyson approaches memory from a queer perspective is also a subject of critical writing, as Greyson is a self-identified queer filmmaker and recognized as a Canadian auteur filmmaker indicating that his body of work contains consistent themes and styles. In addition to the many quotations above, Christopher Gittings, in *Activism and Aesthetics: The Work of John Greyson*, writes of Greyson's queer approach in creating *Lilies*, stating that in films like *Lilies* "the ruling heterosexual masculinity taught in homo-social spaces, such as Scouting, the military, boys' schools, and locker rooms, creates spaces that, in Greyson's words, can be 'turned inside out,' transformed into spaces for the exploration of an 'other' deconstructive teaching of gender and sexuality" (126). In *Lilies* Greyson is able to use memory as a space to tell an untold story about young love.

My Winnipeg

Like Greyson, Guy Maddin is a self-identified queer filmmaker and is also written of as an auteur with his own unique style, often engaging in memory narratives. William Beard, in his

book *Into the Past: The Cinema of Guy Maddin*, writes about the filmmaker's career up to the release of *My Winnipeg*, stating that his last film is the culmination of Maddin's "most powerful and productive" phase. Beard also asserts that Maddin and his films should be the subject of academic study (15), and they continue to be so.

David Church had in fact made Maddin the subject of academic study in his collection *Playing with Memories: Essays on Guy Maddin*, published in 2006, the year before Beard's book. With an international list of authors, the book is a thorough exploration of Maddin's films and film style and places his work within theories of the Canadian national identity. George Melnyk highlights Maddin's place as a Canadian film auteur in his review of Church's book, "Packing, Unpacking, and Repacking The Cinema of Guy Maddin," writing "his [Maddin's] psychosexual fantasies, his deeply Freudian escapades, and his dance with memory and illusion are rooted in the Canadian cultural landscape" (6).

Church also focuses on themes of memory in his collection. He discusses Maddin's ability to foreground the construction of memory in *My Winnipeg*, writing:

Forged at the intersection of pastiche and personal history, *My Winnipeg*, like Maddin's other films, deftly restores or recreates individual-cum-collective mythologies, marked by a populist emphasis upon emotionality and a patently artificial archaism that never lets viewers forget cinema's role in constructing cultural memory. By resurrecting past artistic styles in the form of pre-decayed artifice, he implicitly calls into question those styles' original artificiality, while at the same time celebrating their ability to both convey and acquire meaning across time. (17)

Maddin, according to Church, employs not just narrative but also filmic style to show how memory is never neutral, but its meaning is generated out of present motivations. And according to Maddin, it is very much constructed. Alison Gilmour discovered this in her interview with Maddin, when he shared his use of memory in *My Winnipeg*: “It’s all true as long as it helps us get at what’s happened and what could happen.”

The Hanging Garden

Like Maddin’s self-stated goal in *My Winnipeg*, to consider what happened or could have happened, Kristopher Cannon writes of *The Hanging Garden* that it “forces this retroactive life into visibility. The specter of William hanging in the garden forces the idea of a gay childhood that failed to happen. Re-writing the childhood as a site where a gay childhood failed to happen? – the gay childhood that never was? The gay child that haunts every ultrasound” (Cannon 275). A gay childhood failed to happen but could have happened, or might yet. Cannon considers images from the film of the memory of a lost gay childhood in comparison to ultrasound pictures of babies in utero, who he writes are discussed by prospective families and medical staff in heteronormative terms. Leach also discusses Fitzgerald’s film for its queer themes, referring to “the films of Thom Fitzgerald, another openly gay filmmaker, whose work uses representations of the male body to challenge aesthetic and cultural norms and the ideologies they sustain” (111). I would add that the films also challenge traditional memories of childhood for the gay adult.

***Marion Bridge and The Hanging Garden* (1997)**

Marion Bridge has not yet been the focus of academic writing. However, that in and of itself is rather on theme with the aforementioned concern that Canadian film is largely ignored. The

above discussion of major writings on each of these films is relatively brief because there is only a small amount of writing on any of them. According to Leach, the same fate would befall Fitzgerald's later films. Leach writes that "*The Hanging Garden* was a huge success, but he [Fitzgerald] encountered strong critical resistance to his later films" (109). Leach writes of Maddin that he is an "important [contributor] to a major but often overlooked, tendency in Canadian cinema, challenging both the canonical and commercial pressures that seek to define the 'mainstream'" (86). Maddin challenges the canon and, perhaps as a result, his films fail to receive the attention they might otherwise attract as Canadian films. While Maddin may have been marginalized within (or outside) the Canadian film canon, Greyson questions national cinema in general. He says, in an unpublished interview with Gittings,

I've never really bought into the notion of national cinema per se. I think it is useful in terms of teaching and festivals and it organizes the world but is it useful? Does it feed me aesthetically, politically, intellectually? Not at all. Some of my favorite filmmakers in the world happen to be Robert Lepage, Mike Holboom, and Atom Egoyan, but does that mean I work overtime trying to fit those three completely different artists into a notion of Canadian cinema? (130)

While there is little evidence that User Reviewers have any effect on canon writing or film popularity, reviewers of these films write about the film's depictions of queerness, as an adaptation in the case of *Lilies*, for their alignment with an understanding of Canadian film and filmmakers, and in relation to memory.

Memory

This dissertation focuses on how *Marion Bridge*, *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, and *My Winnipeg* explore themes of memory, what User Reviewers include when they discuss their memories of film watching, and the personal memories that are sparked by the films and process of writing about them. The definition of memory that will be used in this dissertation embraces the contradictions that memory straddles, just as User Reviewers do. Memories are personal recollections about the past that occur in the context of the present and are informed by all the time that has passed between the original event and the imagined future the past points to. Memories are factually unreliable, and yet they contain vital personal significance. They are deeply personal and also highly negotiable, as an individual's memory and someone else's recollections of the same event will never completely align. Finally, memories can be sparked — or recalled, seemingly unprovoked by any stimulus, even those completely unrelated to any actual history. This dissertation will show that User Reviewers respond to memory stories through their own memories, showing that rather than considering a field called Memory Studies, the area of research should be known as *Memories Studies*. Users contest and challenge the memory narratives told in these films as unreliable, using their own equally unreliable memories as evidence, all the while maintaining that memories contain significant meanings.

Memory and cultural theorist Jose Van Dijck writes that “memories effectively are rewritten each time they are activated” (32) and “memory deposits are prone to revision as their owners continue to dictate their reinterpretation” (“Memory Matters” 37). Memories are not static, but constantly evolve and grow with each remembrance in the present. Each

remembrance is an interpretation. As Wojciech Kalaga writes: “There is no natural, direct connection between the real and the remembered” (20) because “remembering and interpreting are inseparable” (33). Interpretation occurs in the act of remembering again and again, and differently each time. French historian Pierre Nora further explores this relationship, stating, “We no longer inhabit that past, we only commune with it through vestiges — vestiges, moreover, which have become mysterious to us and which we would do well to question, since they hold the key to our identity, to who we are” (4). Who we are, according to Nora, depends on a mystery constantly being interpreted, similar to how User Reviewers write of seeking a significant meaning in memories that they never seem to find, no matter how many times they remember it differently.

Because a memory is different each time it is recalled and re–interpreted, memories as statements of factual accounts of the past cannot possibly be reliable. User Reviewers cannot be expected to be reliable for factual accounts of the films they discuss, but instead provide interpretations of a remembered experience. “The concept of ‘authentic memory’ is highly problematic. The desire for memory as stable, reassuring and constant has always been plagued by the fear of its instability and unreliability, and its disposition towards fantasy and forgetting” (Grainge 5). This instability is hard to manage, as Russel Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty explain In *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*: even memory studies are discursive, unstable, and constantly changing. However, in spite of — and perhaps because of — its instability and the need to constantly re–interpret, memory opens up a space for representation in history writing. “Unlike history, which has always been in the hands of the public authorities, of scholars and specialised peer groups, memory has acquired all the new

privileges and prestige of a popular protest movement” (Nora 5). Memory creates a space to retell stories of the past from new, highly personal perspectives that can illuminate more of what might have happened.

This space for memory and new representations in history requires constant negotiations about the past in the present. Memories are deeply personal, but the rememberer (a term used throughout to refer to the person doing the remembering) was not always alone in the incidents being remembered. Instead, other people who were present at the events being remembered are often implicated in the remembering, as part of the original event, as part of the events that have happened since the original event, or as witnesses to the memory-telling. Barbara Mistzal aptly explains this contradiction, stating, “While it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than just a personal act” (6). This dissertation will show that the User Reviewers of these films are keenly aware that past events can be remembered in a myriad of different ways. These User Reviewers challenge the idea of a singular memory just as memory has challenged the idea of a single historical narrative about the past.

Memories can be recalled at any time and sparked by any stimulus, even if there is no natural connection between the stimulus and the event being remembered. Furthermore, the same stimulus may fail to recall the memory for interpretation a second time. Films can be sparks for remembering. Van Dijck writes that “mediated memories are material triggers for future recall” (“Mediated Memories as Amalgamations” 168). However, she also states that “the hypothesis that mediated memory objects remain constant each time we use them as triggers, is equally fallacious as the outdated theory that memories remain unaffected upon retrieval” (“Mediated Memories as Amalgamations” 166). The User Reviewers who write about

Marion Bridge, The Hanging Garden, Lilies, and My Winnipeg write of their memory of watching the films and the memories the films sparked, but in the act of writing they are at once re-interpreting their memory of watching the film and the memories it sparked as memories being retrieved again. While Van Dijck writes of memory objects as triggers, for the purposes of this dissertation, recalled memories will be referred to as being 'sparked' as the memories that are recalled are not always traumatic in nature in the way that the term 'trigger' has come to imply. This dissertation contributes to the discussion of memory by exploring how viewers engage in both the memory told and how these films spark the viewer's own personal memories.

Memory and Film

Film is uniquely qualified to share memory stories. Memory and cinema expert Russel Kilbourn argues that "cinema is constitutive of memory in its deepest and most meaningful sense" (1). In *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema*, he argues that film is the best art form to interrogate how memory functions because it allows an internal act to be made external, because it has the ability to show memory as having multiple perspectives by entering the minds and visions of several characters, and because film can allow for the past to occur in the present, blurring the line between something that happened in the past and something that is being encountered in the present (1–2). Film and memory theorist Annette Kuhn agrees with Kilbourn, writing that "cinema, in other words, is peculiarly capable of enacting not only the very activity of remembering, but also ways of remembering that are commonly shared; it is therefore peculiarly capable of bringing together personal experiences and larger systems and processes of cultural memory" ("Memory Texts and Memory Work" 6). Kuhn writes of enacting memory through film, something that happens

in each of the four films explored in this dissertation. An enactment seems to carry over into the User Reviews, which find the act of remembering sparked by the films about remembering they are writing about.

The most obvious intersection between film and memory is the flashback. Maureen Turim's thirty-year-old work on the subject remains a thorough and useful exploration of the filmic technique. Turim writes that at their core, "flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past. . .[a] fictional individual's remembered experience" (2). Turim also writes about how flashbacks can be framed and manipulated to remind the viewer that they are watching a film or a re-creation of the past:

More complicated flashback structures tend to emphasize the means by which a film presents its fiction. The imaginary entrance into a present reality is provided, but the spectator is made aware of the threshold and the process of traversing it. These manipulations of narrative temporality can serve to self-consciously expose the mechanisms of filmic narration, the artifice through which time becomes an expressive element of narrative form. (16)

By foregrounding the filmic production, a film can emphasize that memories are being reproduced in the present, again showing that the act of remembering is taking place in the present.

While this dissertation discusses only one film with true flashbacks, *The Hanging Garden*, both *My Winnipeg* and *Lilies* rely on flashback techniques. Both *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg* deliberately foreground the protagonist's active generation of memory works within the film, ensuring that the viewer is always aware of the production. As Chapter 3 will discuss, both

Simon and Guy create their memory works in order to assert narrative control over past events. Kilbourn explains that mainstream memory film “centers around the protagonist’s fraught relationship with his or her identity, particularly in terms of a loss of and attempt to regain authentic memory, the past in its wholeness, and therefore a redemptive understanding of a present continuous with a past self” (*Cinema, Memory, Modernity* 95). For Kilbourn, memory and remembering occur on film and for characters, but Alison Landsberg asserts that film offers viewers the chance to suture the experience of the characters to their own. She writes,

to what extent do modern technologies of mass culture, such as film, with their ability to transport individuals through time and space, function as technologies of memory? In what ways do these technologies of mass culture challenge the distinction between individual and collective memory? How might individuals be affected by memories of events through which they did not live? (1)

Landsberg concludes that film memories can become what she calls ‘Prosthetic Memories’. She explains:

This new form of memory, which I call prosthetic memory emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or a museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history. The person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics. (2)

The idea that viewers could come to remember the experiences of Simon, Agnes, Sweet William, Guy or those of any other character from these films as their own is not borne out in the User reviews written of the films. In fact, this dissertation will show that User Reviewers do not bear out the idea that viewers align with the protagonist's ideas but instead often write in a way that discredits or disputes the protagonist's position. When User Reviewers do respond to the memories told in each of these films, they write about the memory narratives told in the films from the perspective of several characters. User reviewers do not write as if they are remembering through the protagonist, taking on their memories as their own, but rather User Reviewers are inspired by the films into the act of remembering their own memories of the film, their viewing experience, and whatever personal memories both inspire.

In her writing on *Prosthetic Memory*, Landsberg did not interview viewers. However, Kuhn did just that in her case study published in "What to Do with Cinema Memory? Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies." Kuhn sought out and interviewed older adults about their memories of watching films as children. Her contention was that "film scholars dismiss cinema going and historians dismiss the importance of memories on film" (86). Her research found that there are three clear areas of memory for cinema goers: memories of moments or scenes from the films they watched, memories of the rememberer's life at the point the film was seen, and memories of cinema going. In giving voice to memories of film watchers, Kuhn finds that:

a deeper understanding of how cinema memory works discursively, rhetorically and experientially can bring to light, concretely, some of the psychical and cultural processes through which the act of remembering film and remembering cinema can bind us into

shared subjectivities. This exploration thus demonstrates how in the production and operation of cinema memory private and public, personal and collective, worlds shade into one another, interweave and work together in a range of different ways. (96)

This dissertation also seeks to explore informants' experiences with cinema memory, but in this case the films are also about memories, and the User Reviewers' memories are completely voluntary, unshaped by research questions, and shared publicly in a digital forum.

Memory and Digital Media

This dissertation focuses on recordings of memories on film and on digital media. User Reviewers create their own memory texts on-line in digital systems that have their own unique relationship to memory. Just as Landsberg explores the possibilities that viewers take on prosthetic memories from their encounters with filmic memories, Van Dijck explains in her article "Mediated Memories: Personal Cultural Memory as Object of Cultural Analysis," "mediated memories are concurrently embodied through the mind and brain, enabled by media technologies and embedded in a cultural context" (158). The IMDb provides the context for User Reviewers to publish their memories, and the scope of the IMDb forum shapes how the User Reviewers' memories are told and shared.

In 2009 Joane Garde-Hansen explained that, "While memory has been a contentious issue for historical studies, it has been fully embraced by media studies" (3). She goes on to explain how memory has changed with digitization:

Examining digital memory through the perspective of memory discourses enables an exploration of the ways in which digital memories through this shared code are merging the personal with the public, as well as creating discourses that are more malleable,

alterable, and revocable [. . .] generating new metaphors and discourses for remembering. (18)

Garde–Hansen points to the shift that digitization has offered memory, to be both personal and shared. This is certainly true of the reviews of these films. User Reviewers write their personal memories in a public forum, and the public can respond to and engage with them. Andrew Hoskins calls this “networked memory.” He writes that networked memory is a “more temporally and spatially adequate perspective on memory that deliberately highlights the dynamics of mediated memory as something created when needed, driven by the connectivities of digital technologies and media, and inextricably forged through and constitutive of digital social networks” (Hoskins, “Digital Network” 91). For Hoskins, digital memory needs a new approach because it bridges the personal and the collective (“The Mediatisation” 28). The line between what is personal and what is collective memory is an ongoing debate in media memory which will be discussed below.

The balance between the personal and collective playing out in digital media research and thinking bears directly on this dissertation. The Users writing reviews of the four films are individuals, presumably writing of their personal experiences. However, they are all writing about the same films within the parameters of the IMDb’s terms, and their reviews follow remembering practices that replicate. Those trends include engaging in digital memory formation. Garde–Hansen writes of this desire to record memories digitally: “it is our need to remember and share everything and the limitations of doing this mentally as individuals that drives human beings to extend our capacity for remembering through media forms and practices” (7). Van Dijck studies the need to digitize personal memories in his study of the

website Flickr, a photo-sharing site where individuals can build up photos and memories for preservation: “The formation of memory is increasingly structured by digital networks, and memory’s constituting agency is both technological and human. Memory that mixes not only the individual and the collective, the private and the public, but also past and future past into a virtual stream of ‘present’ (“Flickr” 2). Flickr is the site of personal archives of memory, similar to how IMDb is the site where User Reviewers can share and record personal memories of films. Other sites will come and go with similar functions, but these two show point-in-time examples of how personal archives of memory thrive online.

Personal Memory or Collective Practice of Remembering

Whether sites like the IMDb and Flickr are platforms for personal collections or a collective archive of memory is an ongoing debate. As cultural historian and collective memory theorist Wulf Kansteiner points out, “collective memory studies have not yet sufficiently conceptualized collective memories as distinct from individual memory” (180). In the case of the User Reviews discussed here, the writers log their personal experiences, but the link between them is both the film being discussed and the platform. Maurice Halbwachs coined the term *collective memory* and he argued that “groups reconstruct their past experiences collectively, and so even though an individual does have a particular perspective on this group reconstruction of the past, he or she does not have an independent memory of the past” (67). User Reviewers on the IMDb are not a group, as will be explained in further detail below; they are individuals whose only identifiable connections are the films and the practice of writing reviews. However, Jan Assman added to the definition of collective memory by stating that it is “shared by a number of people and it conveys to these people a collective cultural identity” (110). Whether or not

User Reviewers see themselves as sharing a collective identity is not apparent in how they write their reviews, although some do indicate within their text that they have read other reviews before contributing their own very personal experiences.

The User Reviews discussed here are deeply personal memories that are clearly sparked by the film but which veer swiftly into recollections of predominantly separate remembered events. Nicolas Russell's article "Collective Memory before and after Halbwachs" considers the lack of clear delineation between collective and personal memory. Russell writes that "episodic memory allows individuals to remember past personal experience and to mentally reconstruct past time. It is highly personal and subjective and cannot be passed from one person to another" (798). According to Russell's definition, User Reviews are episodic memories as they are stand-alone individual memories that are non-transferable beyond the sharing of the film.

For the purposes of this dissertation I will argue that User Reviewers, as they are not part of an identifiable audience or group, do not form a collective. However, their remembering practice and digital communication, even if it is only a one-sided conversation, do constitute a collective practice, given that all participants must follow the very loose guidelines of the IMDb, they are writing about the same original text, and their created memory texts contain thematic trends that replicate. Kansteiner concludes that all memories are collective because the individual expressing them must conform to collectively agreed-upon rituals of commemorating and remembering, often hovering around a historical moment or common thread (190). There is a common thread in these reviews – the film.

The act of remembering the film is also a thread that weaves through all of the reviews. Van Dijck writes that personal memory is conceived of as "a cultural phenomenon that

encompasses both the activities and products of remembering....We inscribe experiences in the present to facilitate future recall; such material inscriptions are always filtered through discursive conventions, social and cultural practices, and technological tools” (“Mediated Memories: Personal Cultural Memory” 261). User Reviewers create products of remembering when creating their reviews, and I will show that these texts are filtered through conventions of the IMDb’s rules and through unwritten rules of how User Reviews are created. In this case it is the act of remembering that is collective. Halbwachs suggests that this constituted a form of collective memory when he writes “an individual's social interactions with members of his or her group determine how one remembers experience from the past and what it is that he or she remembers” (22). While User Reviewers do not interact socially, they do interact on a digital platform, and Sara Jones has argued in her paper “Catching Fleeting Memories: Victim Forums as Mediated Remembering Communities” that “a key difference in the virtual world is [. . .] that the right of the community members to belong to the remembering group cannot be verified by anything other than the textual memory they produce in the forum” (395). Based on Jones’s description, the text alone allows User Reviewers to be part of a remembering group.

Kansteiner’s definition of collective memory sums up the ways in which User Reviewers constitute texts of collective memory. He writes “we should conceptualize collective memory as the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors: The intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who ignore or transform such artifacts according to their own interests” (180). Users do all of this when writing reviews. They interact at a highly digitized moment in history; they write on digital

platforms both within guidelines of the IMDb and conventions of film reviews to meet their own remembering goals.

Users

Users are humans on the far side of a screen who contribute content to online public platforms. From news media commentary to social media sites to video sharing platforms and beyond, Users share creations that are rich in information and ideas about how they engage with any given topic. This dissertation will show the value of analyzing user–contributed content to further understand user beliefs and practices.

For the purposes of this dissertation Users are members of the IMDb site who create a site–based account in order to login and upload their personal reviews about films within the loosely required site guidelines the site has established. The identity of the Users is difficult to ascertain. IMDb User Reviewers write from the other side of their screen, from anywhere in the world with access to the site. They cannot be identified as any uniform group, they have likely never met, they do not have ongoing discussions, and they almost certainly have not watched the films they review together – if they even actually watched the films at all. In fact, very little verifiable information about any User Reviewer will ever be known. They are not an audience, as they do not assemble in any way other than to submit their reviews under single logins. Instead, they are a group of seemingly diverse individuals who submit memories about films to the website for potential public consumption.

What Users do have in common is the requirement to agree to the terms and conditions of the IMDb site. The IMDb.com launched in 1990, and one of the site’s first features was the User Review listing, where visitors to the site could write about their thoughts on any film.

While other sites such as rottentomatoes.com and Facebook.com have User Review options, the IMDb.com began this practice before the films discussed in this dissertation were released. In this way, the IMDb contains reviews from directly after the films' initial release dates. In order to add a review, visitors simply create an account and agree to the site's usage guidelines, and their submitted content is displayed under the listing for the film they are reviewing. Axel Bruns writes of produsage (a term I explain further below) sites such as the IMDb.com that "whether instigated by the operators of produsage sites, or out of their own motivation, Users create content. In many cases the sites themselves act as tools for content production; in several others, the sites provide or point to useful tools and offer hints, guidelines, and frameworks for effective produsage" (3). IMDb.com provides a tool for content creation and some guidelines for User Reviewers when creating content; however, they do not promise to enforce their rules. IMDb.com suggests that User Reviewers create texts that are 50–500 characters in length, that they contain no profanity or insulting comments, that they leak no personal information, and that they do not include opinions about historical events or the subject matter of the films. However, IMDb.com also clearly states that it "has the right but not the obligation to monitor and edit or remove any activity or content." Instead, the site relies on visitors to monitor each other, leaving these guidelines rather innocuous. User Reviewers are thus relatively free to write about the films they review. User reviews are also not edited for grammatical or stylistic errors; therefore for the purposes of this dissertation, quotations from IMDb will be included exactly as they appear on the site.

Once they have agreed to the terms of the site, Users can post their reviews publicly.

User Reviews are personal accounts of viewers' memories of a film and are full of information about how the review writers have responded to and interpreted the films they write about. As small personal memory texts about the film, they are further content for analysis related to the film. As Kuhn states, these are "material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and possibilities" ("Memory Texts and Memory Work" 186). Axel Bruns maintains that in the publishing of content on behalf of Users, sites like IMDb.com become "archives, enabling Users to trace the evolution of content through its various stages, so that the continuous development of new versions of content leads to the creation of a palimpsest: a repeatedly over-written, multilayered document" (3). The reviews in the archive are texts for analysis, texts that on examination reveal trends and themes in how reviewers write about the memory tale each film tells. These are new media texts for analysis, and Users are producers of new media.

Through analyzing User Reviews, this dissertation brings viewers into the conversation that each film begins. Moving beyond the traditional study of Canadian film that considered the films as static texts for analysis, created by skilled auteurs, high culture artists, or cheap money makers, and positioned the audience as a blank canvas over whom the films held deep one-way influence, this research will show that viewers, as producers of their own related texts, have a great deal to say back to the films. This research positions Users as co-creators of the meaning of the films they write about through their own memory lens.

Elizabeth Bird explains the idea of 'producers', stating that "The concept of the 'producer' evolved from 'prodsumer', a term coined by Alvin Toffler (1980) to describe this projected shift from a passive consumer society to one in which many more people will prefer

to provide home-grown services to themselves and others, selectively producing and consuming depending on their interests and expertise” (506). As Users create content shared publicly online, the traditional and tenuous distinction between producers and consumers of content is blurred. As Henry Jenkins writes, “Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (*Convergence Culture*, 3).

That the internet provides an open forum where anyone can produce content alongside mainstream, financially well-backed production companies is not as democratizing as might be hoped for. In fact, just because User Reviewers on the IMDb are given space to write their reviews does not mean that anyone reads them or that they have any influence over those who do. Van Dijck asserts in “Users like You? Theorizing Agency in User-Generated Content” that Users “have a rather limited potential to ‘wrest power from the few’, let alone to ‘change the way the world changes’” (42). This, she says, is because Users distribute content on a network that is controlled and owned by an organization (42); these sites’ interfaces shape the Users’ participation (45), and the “user is often bolstered by a deceptive opposition between the passive recipient . . . and the active participant” (43). Finally, it is because some Users are paid that they are therefore not really amateurs, but people selected to produce content (49).

Whether or not the User Reviewers of these films wish to be considered producers of content alongside filmmakers, for instance, is unclear, and the research done on IMDb Users has not asked this question. Instead, there are four published projects that make use of User-generated IMDb content as data for analysis. These four projects consider how visitors to the

IMDb engage with the available User-generated content in making film choices or rating reviews. None considers the narrative connection between the film and the text being generated by the User, nor how User Reviewers write about their own memories sparked by the film-watching experiences. The first, Guonsong Shao's 2009 project "Understanding the Appeal of User-Generated Media: A Uses and Gratification Perspective" considers why individuals engage with User-generated media. In this case, the research explores how internet surfers engage with the material rather than why the Users create it. The project assumes "that audiences consciously choose the media that could fulfill their needs and that they are able to recognize their reasons for making media choices" (9). Also based on User choice, the second project, Topal and Ozsoyoglu's 2016 conference paper "Movie review analysis: Emotion analysis of IMDb movie reviews," focuses on how IMDb User content affects film-watching selection. They argue that while visitors to the IMDb choose what films to watch based on ratings and maybe reading a few reviews, this data would be better used to understand how the strength of the reviewer's emotional response to a film influences film choice for site visitors. The third project, I. L. K. Bore's project "Reviewing romcom: IMDb users and 500 Days of Summer," considers how User Reviewers write about the films they watch, but in each case this is about viewers responding favourably or negatively to the films. Like Topal and Ozsoyoglu's research, this project considers viewer preference rather than discusses the film's content and the viewers' engagement with it. The fourth project, Banerjee and Chua's conference paper "Tracing the growth of IMDb reviewers in terms of rating, readability and usefulness," seeks "to investigate how reviewers in the IMDb online community grow from novices to experts in terms of rating, readability and usefulness" (57). The project concludes that novice reviewers gave

more consistently high ratings than did intermediate reviewers. This project relied on ratings of Users over several films rather than considering a textual analysis of the reviews. All four of the projects consider how visitors on the IMDb engage with the available User-generated content in making film choices or rating reviews. None considers the narrative connection between the film and the text being generated by the User, nor how User Reviewers write about their own memories sparked by the film-watching experiences.

The focus of these projects is on film review efficacy and film choice. None considers the reviews to be a personal engagement to the film for the reviewer's own purposes. One other study did look more closely at User Reviews to consider how Users navigate film narratives. Tossing out whether or not they liked the film, Joe Lipsett's project "'One for the Horror Fans' vs. 'An Insult to the Horror Genre': Negotiating Reading Strategies in IMDb Reviews of *The Cabin in the Woods*" explored how viewers wrote about their approach to watching the film in order to manage watching it. This study did consider narrative, but like the studies discussed above, it focused on the film's accessibility and popularity. The study was about the films being reviewed rather than the reviewers themselves.

This dissertation adds to the slowly growing body of research exploring IMDb User Reviews by extending the discussion to include the User Reviewers' very personal and individual experiences with the film, their memories of film-watching, and the personal memories the film and watching it sparked.

The films selected for this research were chosen for their alignment in key areas. All four are Canadian films: they were filmed in Canada, have predominantly Canadian actors in them, and share stories that are visibly and narratively set in Canada. As was discussed earlier in this

introduction, Canadian filmmakers share in a tradition of creating films that seek to show Canadians to themselves and the world while also being vehicles for further off-screen discussions. All four films were created within a ten-year window on either side of the turn of the millennium, which also featured the aforementioned heightened period of remembering and thinking about remembering. These four films also fall into that timely period of intense remembering, as they depict the story of adults remembering specific childhood experiences either through a return home or a recreation of the past through a memory work.

To consider the theme of memory in *Marion Bridge*, *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, and *My Winnipeg*, and in IMDb User Reviews of these films, I have undertaken a textual analysis. I began by considering how the films share the deeply personal memory stories of their protagonists and how each film privileges their interpretation of what happened in each protagonist's childhood. At the time of downloading the reviews from the IMDb.com there were a total of 117 reviews of the four films. To analyse them I then read, and reread, and re-reread at least one more time each of these reviews in order to determine the themes discussed across each film's reviews and across the body of reviews of all four films. This close textual analysis of the User Reviews of each of the films also noted how viewers responded to the memory tales being told on film as well as how User Reviewers wrote about their memories of watching the films and what additional memories the films and watching sparked.

Paul Antze and Michael Lambek write "that memories are never simply records of the past but are interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, and social contexts of recall and commemoration" (vii). These texts, both films and User Reviews of them, 'bear the imprint' of how memories are shared and in turn inspire further

sharing. Nothing can be accurately identified about the User Reviewers writing on the IMDb, but as Abigail De Kosnik, who refers to sites like the IMDb as rogue archives, asserts, “Through analyzing Internet fan fiction archives, we can understand the circumstances, motivations, and decisions that have shaped rogue digital memory” (12). We can come to understand how these four films have inspired User Reviewers to remember.

In fact, many of the theorists cited in this introduction call for increased and innovative study of on-line memories. Bird writes that “we need more complex explorations of audience practices that take into account the vast range of online participation, remembering that much audience activity may remain superficial” (505). In conducting a close textual analysis of User Reviews, this dissertation will explore these short but complex texts that leak information about memory and remembering in film watching. This approach also responds to Kansteiner’s request that “Scholars in memory studies continue to design innovative ways of understanding media reception in order to study past, contemporary, and future collective memories” (195). A close reading of these reviews allows for themes and patterns of viewer engagement to emerge and point to new understandings about how viewers engage with film and film memory through their own memories.

Sparked by Bird’s, Kansteiner’s, and Hermes’s calls for new forms of research into audience practice, media reception, and *civic research*, this dissertation seeks, without bias, to explore each of the four films and all of the more than 117 IMDb User Reviews of them in order to consider how the memory narratives told in the films become meaningful to User Reviewers as stories and as sparks for personal memory telling. This process of exploring the film narrative and the viewers’ experience and interpretation of it tests a new methodology for studying

viewer engagement with films that has potential application anywhere Users respond to media texts. This methodology allows researchers to consider how Users make meaning out of the texts they engage with. That meaning might just reveal what ‘makes life worthwhile’ (Hermes 83) for these Users.

Conducting a textual analysis of both the four films and User Reviews of them in the IMDb will lead to new understandings of how memory and remembering are portrayed in these films, how User Reviewers interpret these memory narratives, how User Reviewers respond to Canadian films, as well as how User Reviewers recall their film–watching experience and have their own memories sparked through the process of watching and writing. For these several hundred User Reviewers, remembering is a worthwhile and ongoing negotiation between what they witness on film and their own sparked experience — a negotiation that Users indicate leads to a rarely specified significant meaning.

Chapter 2

From Shush to Watch Out! Caught Remembering *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden*

Thom Fitzgerald's *The Hanging Garden* (1997) and Wiebke Von Carolsfeld's *Marion Bridge* (2002) are films about an adult returning to their childhood home more than a decade since they fled a harsh childhood experience. In each case the memories that the protagonists uncover are revealed to the viewer as the characters remember. The films maintain the remembering perspective of the protagonist, but as the memories flood back they are not necessarily told in a straightforward narrative fashion. When User Reviewers engage in remembering the films, they interpret them through their own personal experiences and memories in a way that is often and inexplicably, given the scope of User Reviews, very different from how the films depicted the memory story. This chapter will explore how the films construct memory through the privileging of the protagonists' remembering process. The following chapters will go on to show how User Reviewers omit, neglect, and often contest the memories shown. As the only material given to analyse how Users respond to these memory tales is what is contained within their reviews, it would be inappropriate to attempt to guess at why Users do not engage with the memories by focusing on the protagonist's perspective and through the tools used for telling.

When the adult Sweet William (Chris Leavins) in *The Hanging Garden* arrives at his childhood home after a ten-year absence, his slim, adult body appears distorted on screen. When he steps out of his red convertible, with the top up, the first parts of him to appear are his feet, wearing the same dark grey canvas running shoes that his character wears at every age he appears in the film. The camera then captures his eyes in the rearview mirror as he checks

his hair, then his nose, and mouth. When his body finally appears whole on the screen, it is his back, filmed as he climbs the stairs towards the garden. Next the film shows William's hand on the garden gate, followed by the back of his head as he surveys his surroundings. He is then filmed again from behind as he climbs the stairs, this time the camera picking up his sister Rosemary's (Kerry Fox's) point-of-view of William in a distant profile shot. The distorted and dismembered body shots continue as William enters the house, his face filmed through the glass jars on a shelf, then his eyes and nose as he sits to use his inhaler. When William finally appears facing forward, the camera captures his body intact via a mirror, while he tries on the far-too-large suit rented by his mother for his sister's wedding, the event he has travelled home for. Throughout this sequence, as William arrives home, he is fragmented, slowly re-appearing or coming into focus in mirrors within the space of his childhood, piece by piece. When he eventually does appear re-assembled, he is framed and entrapped by the mirror his image is seen in.

In the opening scenes of *Marion Bridge*, Agnes (Molly Parker) is also returning to her childhood home, after a decade and a half away, and like Sweet William, she too is fragmented and seen in reflection in her debut shots. When the camera first shows Agnes, it offers a lengthy, extreme close-up of her eyes. This shot is followed by one of the back of her head as she sits in an airport chair, a shadowy profile as she turns to see a security guard, and then her hand on a glass at the bar. When her sister Theresa (Rebecca Jenkins) arrives to pick her up, the camera briefly captures Agnes's body, and her face is then framed by the window of her sister's car, much as William was framed by the mirror in his childhood home.

The choice to use distancing and disorienting camera work to introduce their protagonists into the space of their childhood serves a similar purpose in both films. Viewers watching the films are accustomed to an establishing shot or series of shots that orient them to the characters and settings. Without these shots the viewer is given pieces of information that leave them unable to clearly orient themselves, just as the characters returning home are unsure of the memories they will encounter when they return home.

Despite the fact that all four films in this project are about remembering the past, only *The Hanging Garden* contains a flashback. That said, Gilles Deleuze's words about how flashbacks function in films can be applied to other techniques that both of these films use. He writes that the flashback is "a conventional, extrinsic device...generally indicated by a dissolve-link, and the images that it introduces are often superimposed or meshed. It is like a sign with the words: 'watch out! Recollection'" (48). Like a ticker line running under the entire film saying "watch out! Recollection," stylistic and narrative cues remind the viewer that the act of remembering haunts and entraps every scene of these 'memory texts' (Kuhn, "Memory Texts and Memory Work" 2).

The disorienting camerawork encourages the viewers' awareness that the images they are watching are mediated, that their view is deliberately restricted, and that they are not getting—nor going to get—the "whole picture" neatly offered to them. Kilbourn discusses such camera work, long shots, and deep-space takes as "the spatialization of time" (16). These two films employ complex camerawork to 'spatialize time'. The fragmenting, refracting and reflecting discussed above, and the framing, mis-en-scène and soundtrack discussed below, illustrate the protagonists' simultaneous inability to fully exist in the space onscreen and their

inability to escape it. The protagonists straddle two time periods: the present return to their childhood home, in which they don't fully visually exist, and the past of years ago, when they left that same home as teenagers, which they cannot stop remembering. From the mise-en-scène to the soundtrack to the dialogue, both films foreground being caught in the act of remembering.

Once the protagonists assert their memories and versions of the events, the films shift. Remembering in these films is not a solitary act. The other characters in the film are involved in the past, and their versions of past events are not necessarily the same as the protagonists'. These differing opinions about the past further entrap the protagonists in the act of remembering, as they try to sort out for themselves the exact events that left them running from home. Once their story is told, their version of events asserted, the film's recollection signposts fall away, at once validating the protagonists' versions of the past and temporarily freeing them from the constant act of remembering.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to illustrate in detail how the films privilege the protagonists' memories over the memories of other characters, because when User Reviewers write of their engagement with these memories, they do not concur with the film's memory exploration or telling. Instead, User Reviewers remember the memory stories detailed in the film from several characters' perspectives, from their own perspective, and even as texts about very real historical incidents. There is a distinct gap between how memories are narrated in the films and – as will be explored in the next few chapters – what the User Reviewers write about those same memories. This gap points to a key understanding of how viewers engage with memories on film. Despite the films' strong depiction of one version of the

past, User Reviewers consider the film's memory narratives in a more pluralistic way, as will be shown, because in the interpretation their own perspective becomes part of the remembering process.

Sweet William Comes Back Home

Neither Sweet William nor Agnes returns home for the specific purpose of addressing why they left; yet in both cases the return precipitates the act of remembering, as if the space itself were able to spark memories. *The Hanging Garden* tells the story of Sweet William's return to his childhood home, after ten years away, to attend the wedding of his sister Rosemary to his childhood love interest Fletcher (Joel Keller), but this simplistic scenario will yield a much more complicated story. While he is returning for a wedding, he will be thrown into remembering just why he left his abusive and dysfunctional family.

Ten years before the wedding William is back to attend, the teenage Sweet William committed suicide by hanging himself in the family's garden. Having grown up being harangued by his father for his inept gardening skills and as a teenager for his immense weight, William had finally had enough when his mother forced him to have sex with a local prostitute, Dusty Miller (Martha Irving), after his grandmother caught him having an intimate encounter with Fletcher in the family's garden. Berated, rejected, and abused, the teenage William committed suicide, and left his family behind to move to the city. Coming home for the wedding, William will discover that he also never really left and that the ghosts and the results of his maternally sanctioned sexual assault await him. The adult William is not home long before he begins to discover that apparitions of his child and teenage self still exist in the garden and house.

Partway through the wedding, William is launched into a very visceral moment of remembering. He exits the kitchen to the yard and is shocked to see himself as a teenager, standing and watching the reception from the edge of the garden. Just as the adult William appears fragmented, refracted, and reflected, he also appears in other versions of himself. Outside of the film's two flashbacks, the child and adolescent William appear in the present tense of the film to numerous characters.

As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that Rosemary, her father, Whiskey Mac or Poppy (Peter MacNeill), and Violet (Christine Dunsworth) are able to see versions of William and that they have a different relationship with those versions than William himself has. While Whiskey Mac seems soothed by having apparitions of his son around, so that he can dwell in his son's childhood, Rosemary would like to get rid of the nightly vision of her brother hanging from the tree. Rosemary explains that she planned her wedding in the garden to replace the memory of that hanging with the memory of his return. For Rosemary the body in the garden is a memory, but the film gives no indication why these bodies appear. However, they do cause the characters in the film to remember.

The characters who see these bodies, and William's mother, who either does not see them or ignores them, have a different sets of memories about what happened to Sweet William as a teenager and their roles in it. Sweet William would like to take his hanging self down from the tree and out of the garden, which he does at the end of the film. However, he cannot do so without asserting his version of events against those of the other characters. Once William has told his story, he is able to bury the body of his adolescent self, and the framing, refracting, and reflecting devices through which the character was filmed are removed, leaving

him to appear whole in front of the camera. But the child William remains. William has not asserted any narrative order of these memories. The film ends with the camera moving through heavy shrubbery to reveal the child William playing with his father in the garden, both heavily framed by the greenery that almost obscures the image. It is a moment of remembering buried deep in the garden.

Agnes Returns

In *Marion Bridge*, Agnes is not returning home for the first time, and unlike William, she is well aware of the child she had, born of abuse. Since moving away fifteen years previously she has made a few trips back, but as her older sister Theresa (Rebecca Jenkins) constantly reminds her, she was always so drunk and drugged up that she just got everyone upset and left again. The return that opens the film is different. She is coming home to be with her dying mother, and she is tenuously but deliberately sober, and keen to explore her childhood memories. In addition to being with her mother, Agnes takes it upon herself to clean the house physically, ordering remnants of the childhood she and her sisters shared. She also drives along the coast to frequent a small craft shop and spy on the shop girl, Joanie (Elliot Page as Ellen Page), working in it. Neither of these remembering acts is well received by Agnes's sisters, Theresa and Louise (Stacy Smith). Their desire is to keep the past in the past. Agnes, however, becomes increasingly troubled by her memories of why she left and her desire to get to know the shop girl. Although it is never explicitly stated in the film, the shop girl Joanie is assumed to be Agnes' daughter, a child conceived when the fifteen-year-old Agnes was sexually abused by her father (Joseph Rutten). Agnes gave Joanie up for adoption to Chrissy (Hollis McLaren), the craft shop owner. These events precipitated both Agnes's leaving home and her alcoholism. By returning

home she is embarking on a process to discover and assert her version of the events that led to her initial departure.

As with William, the other characters in *Marion Bridge* are implicated in this remembering process, and while their version of events does not appear to differ significantly from Agnes's, they don't want their shared past to be remembered. They want it to remain in the past. In fact, when Agnes does tell her story, it is to an old friend. Theresa then legitimizes Agnes' story when she reluctantly engages in remembering. It is by this telling and validation through her sister that Agnes will be able to face her abusive past, quit her addictive behaviour, and come to know her daughter, even if she can never be a conventional mother to her child. As in *The Hanging Garden*, Agnes tells her version of events, and the way the character appears on screen changes, as she is released from being entrapped in the frame image of remembering.

Both films end by indicating that the protagonists have a new relationship developing with their children and that the characters have "found the good" (Rose, *Marion Bridge*) in the traumatic memory the film recounts, but that memory and remembering cannot fully stop. The children themselves are memory texts, their parents' trauma written in their very creation. William and Agnes will never be free of the traumatic events that led to their leaving home. However, in returning home and in remembering what has happened and telling their story, they are freed from being entrapped by the act of remembering that takes hold of them. In asserting their story, they narrate, order, and claim what has happened to them. In these two films, their stories are given authority as the protagonists' versions of events are promoted as

true through the camera work and narrative techniques that support the protagonists' versions and find resolution in their own narration.

Seeing Through Glass

Fragmented camerawork and cluttered *mise-en-scène* illustrate the protagonists' entrapment in the act of remembering; mirrors are used to remind the viewer of the reflective nature of the entrapment. Mirrors act as reminders of a remembering consciousness in the films. They frame the character within the frame of the mirror itself, like a picture of something past, and at the same time point to a thought process when that character is looking at himself or herself in that past tense frame. William appears in a mirror before he even enters the garden, indicating that he is already aware of the remembering he is about to embark on. The second shot of William's body part is his eyes. The camera films William's eyes as he looks into his own eyes in the rear-view mirror of his car. The shot constructs a very pointed idea of self-introspection into the past. The character is looking into his own eyes, framed in a mirror that captures something past. Similarly, as mentioned above, the first time William appears complete onscreen, it is in a mirror in the room in which he is dressing. The adult William is seen looking at himself in his oversized suit, and in the corner of the mirror the ghost of his teenage self appears for the first time. Several time periods relevant to the film's plot appear in this shot. First there is the present, in which adult William is trying on his oversized suit and in which the ghost haunts, and also the past, when William was the teenager that the ghost evokes in the now adult William. The mirror is a tool that mediates the three time frames, framing the present within the past that it holds. Deleuze writes of this type of splitting of time, explaining its three tenses:

the past is constituted not after the present that is but at the same time, time has to split in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. (81)

Bruce Barber has written about Fitzgerald's use of mirrors as mediating objects. He writes: "the focus on mirrors and mirroring throughout *The Hanging Garden* traces the protagonist's split subjectivity, mediated consciousness and cathected desire" (206). The mirrors and mirroring as Barber discusses them show Deleuze's fracturing of time between past, present, and future. William's consciousness is repeatedly mediated by mirrors. It happens again as he embraces his grandmother and his teenage self appears reflected in the glass behind them, and again as he and Iris put passed-out, drunken Whiskey Mac to bed. Each mirroring occurs as William encounters a different character from his childhood, illustrating a new remembering of his past — another frame of reference that William will contend with as he comes to tell his own story.

There are two mirrors in *Marion Bridge*, and both function to frame the act of remembering and to show Agnes remembering her experiences as separate from those around her. The first mirrors *The Hanging Garden* precisely. Just as William first appears in a rear-view mirror of his car as he returns home, Agnes is shown in the passenger side rear-view mirror of Louise's massive old sedan. All three sisters are on the seat; the rear-view mirror is used to catch Agnes's reaction to her sisters, and also her introspection as the mirror separates her face from the faces of her sisters. It is the last of the fragmented shots of Agnes, but not the last time the rear-view mirror in the car is used to show Agnes's "mediated consciousness." The

rear-view mirror is used repeatedly during the many car scenes with Agnes, alone or with her sisters, as a means of showing Agnes being caught in memory and alone in that memory, separate from her sisters. The other mirror in *Marion Bridge* is in the room to which Agnes' mother returns to spend her last days. The three sisters take turns sitting together or alone with their mother as she is dying. The first of these scenes is a night-time shot. Agnes and Louise are playing cards at a table beside their mother's bed. Mother is drinking heavily as always. The scene opens with the camera focused on the mirror, showing the room in its reflection, framed by the frame of the mirror, and with the whiskey bottle and glasses on the dresser in close proximity to the mirror. The camera shows the room through the mirror; in its reflection we see Agnes gather the glass and liquor, and the camera follows her out of the mirror and into the actual space of the room. The mirror frames the room, and then the camera follows Agnes's mediated consciousness as she enters the space, with the liquor, a substance used to numb Agnes from remembering in her hand, but not for her use. Agnes is caught not only in the past of her childhood abuse but also in the old Agnes, who drank to numb her pain, and while she can stop drinking, she also has to contend with her family members' memories of the drinking Agnes.

Windows function in a similar way to mirrors in both films, except that rather than reflecting the characters' mediated consciousness, they indicate that the character is reflecting on something farther away, another "spatialization of time." Just as Agnes is seen in the rear-view mirror of the car, she and her sisters appear filmed through the windshield and side windows. Each time Agnes goes to the craft shop to watch Joanie, she is filmed through the windshield looking towards the shop. She is watching across time and space in these shots. The

craft shop and Joanie are in the present, but she sits in the car behind the window, very much present in the scene, but caught in the memory of how her daughter came to be and wondering about the possibilities for the relationship. In telling contrast, Theresa sits in the car to spy, in this case on her ex-husband and his new partner in her old house. The difference is that Theresa is not filmed through the windshield; instead she is filmed from within the car looking out. Her consciousness is not deliberately shown as constrained by the framing of the car window, not trapped in recollection, as her anger and hurt are very present.

In *The Hanging Garden* windows function as frames of recollection to look beyond, to a point in the past outside the present time. They are seen as both constraining to the characters that look out of them and as the actual “watch out” sign that indicates that a flashback is about to occur or has occurred. The film opens with a short segment about the child William, followed by a short segment about the teenage sweet William. The segments are flashbacks, but they are only given the ‘watch out! Recollection’ treatment when they end, and Rosemary is seen through a window, her frame of recollection, looking down at the garden where the segments were set. The film opens with her remembering her brother’s childhood. These memories are her own. As Maureen Turim writes, “if flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past. In fact, flashbacks in film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single and fictional individual’s remembered experience. This process can be called the ‘subjective memory’” (2). That the window shot of Rosemary is shown directly after the recollection of William’s younger selves indicates that it is her “subjective memory.” This subjective memory, indicated by gazing out a window, is

paralleled when William looks out of the same window later in the film, and the story launches into a lengthy flashback about the adolescent William, his awakening homosexuality and the sexual abuse and rejection that led to his flight from home. This second flashback is William's memory, his story of what happened, and the fact that the flashback ends with William waking up, not looking out of the window but waking from a dream or nightmare, as the case might be, foreshadows that the film will support this version of events. William's story as seen in this flashback is the only version of events given any screen time beyond dialogue between William and a fellow remembering character.

Trapped in the Mise-en-Scène

Even when not mediated by glass — reflective or otherwise — the mise-en-scène of both films is constructed to illustrate the characters' entrapment in the act of remembering. When not visiting Joanie or sitting vigil by her mother, Agnes fills her time cleaning out her childhood home. The place is a mess. The kitchen counters are covered with dishes, the stove is stacked with old newspapers, and the front door is completely blocked by objects. The space within the house is cluttered with old stuff. In scenes shot inside the house this old stuff is a highly communicative part of the mise-en-scène. Interior shots in the film are also framed by doorways, adding to the engulfing nature of the mise-en-scène. Two shots in particular illustrate this effect. The first is a shot of Agnes vacuuming the room that her mother will come home to die in. The room is cluttered with furniture, including the dresser with the mirror on it. At quite a distance from the doorway, the screen is filled predominantly by the doorway and outside walls of the room, with just a small portion of the screen showing Agnes in the room, vacuuming. She is trapped in the small, cluttered room, caught in the past she cannot escape

from. In a second shot, Agnes sits at the kitchen table, smoking; the dishes are piled on the counter on one side, the newspapers on the stove on the other. Once again the camera shows the kitchen through the doorway, with lots of outer wall bordering it on either side of the screen. Agnes is trapped in her past, buried in old objects. In this scene the soundtrack is also used to emphasize that Agnes is engulfed in the “spatialization of time.” The sound of a television blares in the background, indicating that in the room from which the camera is filming the TV is on, making the space seen on screen even wider, as that which is not seen is indicated by sound. This technique of increasing the space of the scene using the noise of a television is directly indicated in the play version of the story from which the film was adapted. In fact, the stage directions of Daniel Maclvor’s play indicate “It is essential that the television sound come from a speaker placed in the offstage area where the television is indicated” (14). His goal was to increase the play’s space using sound, and Von Carolsfeld uses that technique again for her film.

Sweet William’s childhood home is equally cluttered, both with plants that are hanging from the ceiling and surrounded by backless shelf units. As mentioned above, when William arrives home, his entrance into the kitchen is filmed from behind a shelf of jars. This blocking of the scene by objects is maintained through most of the interior establishing shots in the film. When William enters his grandmother’s room, the room is filmed through her shelf of knickknacks. When William is filmed in his bed after sexual assault, he is seen through a ladder-like shelf unit that rises up from the footboard of his bed. Like Agnes, when William goes down into the basement to avoid an encounter with his father, he is filmed amidst a pile of old things,

some his childhood items. His entrapment is further illustrated as the voices of the room above filter down to him.

In both films, the space inside the childhood home is cluttered and the *mise-en-scène* is blocked by objects, shelves and door frames. The characters are filmed trapped in the space of their childhood and buried in the objects of that childhood. However, once they assert their story — tell their version of events — the film supports their release from remembering by removing this clutter from the *mise-en-scène* and leaving them open to move in the space of their childhood. Unhampered by remembering the past which they have now verbally narrated, this visual clutter will be removed from the foreground when Agnes and Sweet William ‘tell their story.’

Haunted Soundtrack

If the *mise-en-scène* illustrates the characters sorting through the memories that entrap them, the soundtrack acts as a constant reminder that something out of time is occurring. When Agnes goes to visit Joanie, the same ominous looping piece is played on the soundtrack. A series of repeating guitar notes with a second set of sustained repeating organ notes played at a higher pitch are heard each time she drives in the car towards the craft shop. The same piece is played as she and her sisters visit her father after their mother’s death. It is the final time that the song plays, and this indicates that the memory is complete. In *The Hanging Garden* it is the diegetic sound that is amplified to enhance the remembering sequences. As William climbs the stairs on his return home, the sound of the creaking stairs and the wind in the plants is amplified. Similarly, when he encounters the ghost of his teenage self, the same amplification of garden noises occurs. The heightened garden noises starkly contrast the quiet that falls when

William buries his childhood self. Similarly, when Agnes tells her old friend about what her father did to her when she was fifteen, it is absolutely silent in the house, again a contrast to the noisy bar in which she loudly indicated that she did not want to “tell her god–dam story.”

Remembering: A Family Affair

The soundtrack, the mise–en–scene, and the framing indicate that the act of remembering mediates every scene, and the memory of past events has the characters buried — that is, until they tell their story. Narrative devices also amplify the idea of remembering and memory in these two films. The relationships that Agnes and William have with their families are rich areas of memory discussion, whether in discussing memory loss, the validity of what is remembered, or refusing to engage in the act of remembering alongside the protagonist. Agnes and William are trapped in their remembering, and their versions of events will be asserted; however, other characters are also implicated in that memory. Barbara Misztal, a theorist in the sociology of memory, writes that “while it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than just a personal act” (6). It is the protagonist’s memories that the films tell; however, their story is told against and sometimes in spite of the remembering of the other family members.

In Agnes’s case, her sisters flatly refuse to engage in her quest to dig through her memories. Soon after she begins cleaning the house, Agnes begins to face resistance from her younger sister Louise. Having frustrated Louise by bundling up and storing away her vast stovetop newspaper collection, Agnes tries to lighten her sister’s mood by showing her some old photos she has uncovered in the cleaning process. She sits down beside her sister on the couch and pushes the photos in her face. She attempts to get Louise to look at them, explaining that they are from the Marion Bridge summer. Louise gets increasingly irritated, and finally

pushes Agnes aside, saying “I don’t like all that past stuff.” The film later explains that Agnes is referring to the summer in which she was abused and became pregnant. The photos of that summer are more than just images. To quote Jose Van Dijck again: “The hypothesis that mediated memory objects remain constant each time we use them as triggers is equally fallacious as the outdated theory that memories remain unaffected upon retrieval” (“Mediated Memories as Amalgamations” 166). Louise not only refuses to look at the photos; she also does not want to engage in remembering through them, in re-experiencing that memory as she retrieves it.

Theresa states her feelings about Agnes’s quest to remember and know her daughter clearly and frequently. Soon after her arrival home, Theresa warns Agnes “don’t be starting any trouble,” in double reference to Agnes’s alcohol- and drug-fueled benders, and to her desire to see Joanie. Later, when she catches Agnes with purchases from the craft shop, Theresa gets very angry at her and accuses her of starting up the very trouble she asked her not to start. Theresa says “What you are doing is coming here and causing a big ruckus, getting everybody all upset and then you’re just going to take off. It’s what you’ve always done before.” The ruckus is going to see Joanie, and the upset is the reminder of what happened fifteen years ago, both of which Theresa would prefer to remain unremembered. However, refusing to engage in remembering, and shaming Agnes for doing so, merely serves to foreground the remembering act Agnes is engaging in.

Agnes’s mother does not refuse to partake in the remembering process with her daughter; instead, she encourages her to “look for the good in it” (*Marion Bridge*). This is the request she makes in her dying letter to her daughters, one in which she begs forgiveness for

what has happened, although she never actually says what it was. While Agnes's mother does not refuse to remember as Sweet William's mother does, she does not acknowledge the past Agnes is narrating. Instead, she too wants it buried as if it were a lesson Agnes might learn from.

Unlike in *Marion Bridge*, all the characters of *The Hanging Garden* explicitly discuss or are seen to remember the adolescent William who hanged himself. In fact, they couldn't forget him if they tried, since he remains hanging in the garden nightly. Instead, they just don't talk about it. As the film progresses, it becomes apparent to William that he is not the only one who can see the ghosts of himself. When he awakes from his flashback dream, William gets in his car to find his sister and let her know that Iris is missing. He starts the car, but slams on the brakes as his childhood self runs across the road in front of the car, followed by his daughter Violet, who is chasing him. Not only can Violet see the child William, but she also plays with him. That night William and Rosemary walk out to the garden, and both witness Whiskey Mac trying to pull his dead son down from the tree. It is at this point that Rosemary lets William know that they all see the ghosts. She says, "You got out. Sorry you're not able to just forget it. Neither can we" (*The Hanging Garden*). The ghosts inhabit the garden and the house, never letting William or his family forget his failed childhood. Kristopher Cannon, in his article about fetal photography as images haunted by a gay childhood that never was, explains that "*The Hanging Garden* forces this retroactive life into visibility" (275). By retroactive life he means examining the life that should have been but never was, in this case the life of a gay child. William's life ended when his family refused to accept his sexuality. He hanged himself, killed the

heterosexual child that never was, and went to the city to be a gay adult. In narrating his own traumatic adolescent experience, he is also reclaiming the sexuality he was denied.

Unlike the rest of her family, Iris does not seem to see the ghosts in her own home. She sits at the kitchen table, flanked by her adult son and the ghost of her child son, and is not fazed. Instead, she launches into a discussion about William's grandmother, explaining that she has Alzheimer's. To this Iris adds that despite it, she is happier in her life now that she is sick than when she was well and could remember. The implication of this example that Iris presents her son with is clear. It's easier, even happier, not to remember. This is an ironic moment, as William is keenly aware of his childhood self chowing down on cookies and peanut butter across the table, something he must remember doing himself when he embodied that body.

Agnes and William Tell Their Own Stories

Whether they share the ghostly visions of past versions of their son or brother, or they refuse to be part of getting to know their niece, these characters are all engaged with the memory of what happened, and their pressure to remember or not to remember ultimately culminates in both Agnes and William telling their stories, and asserting their version of what happened.

Kilbourn explains why this is key in films that focus on memory. He writes that these films "centre around the protagonist's fraught relationship with his or her identity, particularly in terms of a loss of and attempt to regain authentic memory, the past in its wholeness, and therefore a redemptive understanding of a present continuous with a past self" (*Cinema, Memory, Modernity* 95). For Agnes and William, it is not just regaining authentic memory but asserting that their abuse happened, or, as Agnes says in her own words, "telling my story."

Trauma theorist Ruth Leys writes about traumatic versus narrative memory in her book *Trauma*

and Genealogy. She argues that a traumatic memory is one that has the victim caught in a perpetual, unmotivated, inescapable remembering, while a memory once narrated is remembered as something that is past (111–12). Shortly after Theresa shames her for making a purchase at Joanie’s craft shop, Agnes has the opportunity to narrate her past and, Leys argues, put it in the past where it no longer has her caught in remembering. Agnes leaves the house after Theresa’s rant, and heads straight for the bar and enough liquor to “find whatever little ways [she] can” (*Marion Bridge*) to forget. Sitting with old friends, she explains the process of Alcoholics Anonymous, all the while sipping on yet another drink and slurring her words. She says she has to tell her “goddamn story” every time and she is sick of telling it. She explains that that is why she has returned. In her drunken estimation, she has come back home because here “no-one wants to hear it,” as if the sign on the causeway says “shush.”

After this rant, Agnes takes up dancing and the scene ends. The next scene depicts Agnes at a friend’s house, moving on to hard drugs. It is in this location that Agnes will tell her story. Sitting on the couch with another woman, she explains about her pregnancy, about it being her body, her fifteen-year-old body, and Valerie (Nicola Lipman) remarks “and it was your father,” which she confirms. It is cathartic for Agnes to tell her story to this virtual stranger, but it is not until she visits her father, her abuser, that she is finally freed from the act of remembering. John Storey writes, “what is provisional in our own memories is confirmed by the memories of others. We often remember with others what we did not ourselves experience firsthand” (101–02). Agnes must see her father one last time, to face him with the full memory of what he did to her. Agnes convinces her sisters to visit him after their mother’s death. The visit is awkward, as their father’s mental state is declining, and he appears to have trouble with

basic functions. Whether or not he even recognizes his daughters is unclear. Upon leaving, however, Agnes has her opportunity to face her father. Agnes exits the screen door of the house ahead of her father, letting it fall on him and forcing him to push it himself even though he is weak. She takes a few steps further, then turns and looks him straight in the face. He stares back blankly. She holds his gaze and turns and walks away. His recognition has failed, but hers has not. My analysis reveals the User Reviewers avoid discussion of this abuse, for the most part. This might be because the film somehow aligns the Viewer with the father, who also fails to recognize the abuse, but of course to make that claim convincingly is beyond the scope of my focus on what the User Reviewers choose to write about.

While Agnes's moment of reckoning with her abusive father seems to go unrecognized, William's story is heard but disputed. William tells his story in a very explicit way, and his version is received even if his listener doesn't necessarily agree with him. The viewer already knows what happened to William through the flashback he has after Iris leaves; however, it is not until Rosemary reveals to William that Violet is his child that he asserts that he was forced into the sexual encounter and it was abusive. The scene in which William asserts his version of his abuse opens with the camera looking through a window covered in sheer curtains, indicating again the "watch out Recollection" that is about to occur. The next shot is in the room, as Rosemary and William hash out their frustration, Rosemary's over William not wanting to take Violet, and William's that he had a child he did not know about and who was fathered as a result of abuse. The following is the conversation the two have about Iris' choice to take William to see Dusty Miller.

William: "How do you force your own child?"

Rosemary: "force you how, Willie?"

William: "I was fifteen years old."

Rosemary: "She thought she was helping you."

William: "Well, she was wrong."

The conversation is brief, but William is able to assert his memories of the abuse he faced at fifteen, and even though it does not put an end to the ghosts for Whiskey Mac and Rosemary, it does for William. By dawn the next day, William has buried his teenage self — much to the disgust of his father.

Dawn also brings changes to the way William appears onscreen. His story has been told; his "attempt to regain authentic memory" is complete. The film illustrates this by removing the mediation and entrapping mise-en-scène that looms in each shot previous to his cathartic memory-telling. William buries his teenage self, and lies down and sleeps on the dirt beside the grave. When the camera opens on him in the morning, it is a close-up of his whole face, with nothing blocking the screen or cutting the image. Similarly, when William gets in his car to return to his life in Toronto, this time he does so with the top of his convertible down: he is no longer trapped by the need to remember.

After facing down her father and telling her story, Agnes is also filmed differently, and finds herself in a new set of wheels. *Marion Bridge* ends with a picnic at the site of the film's name. In preparing to leave for that picnic, Agnes's new position within the screen is made clear. She is filmed in close-up, without being caught in deep shots and "spatialized time." The once-blocked front door of the house is now clear, and the three sisters exit through it in order to get into their new truck. Once in the truck, rather than filming the three sisters through the

windshield, the camera pans up and over the truck as it travels to the beach to meet Agnes's daughter and her mother.

In letting go of the filmic techniques that had entrapped the characters in the act of remembering, the films reinforce the validity of the versions of memory both Agnes and William tell. But they also trouble these memories as definitive, similar to how this dissertation will show that viewers do in their User Review writing. Instead, these are provisional memories, and both Agnes and William will have to re-remember and retell them to their daughters. As Agnes meets Joanie and Chrissy at the beach, she does so as a friend, not as her mother, an inconsistency that will force Agnes back into remembering. And as William drives away in his open car, the camera pans back and through the dense growth of the garden to reveal the ghost of William's childhood self, playing in the garden with his father. The film supports Agnes's and William's memories as their beliefs; however, not all of the ghosts have been laid to rest. William too may yet have to remember.

Chapter 3

Memory: A Tool for Revenge and Escape

In John Greyson's *Lilies* (1996) and Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (2007), both protagonists embark on a mission to produce a creative work of memory. These are not memories accidentally sparked through a trip back home, but are fully crafted productions in traditional storytelling mediums. Simon (Aubert Pallascio) is in prison for the murder of his lover forty years ago. Now dying, Simon enlists the help of fellow inmates and the prison chaplain to mount a stage performance of a play he has written and will direct about the months leading up to the manslaughter of his adolescent lover Vallier (Danny Gilmore). The play is predominantly for an audience of one, a former classmate, the now Bishop Bilodeau (Marcel Sabourin), who framed Simon for the murder. The play is about Simon's love affair with Vallier and his death, but its purpose is not primarily about remembering. Instead, it is designed to commit the revenge of remembering, by forcing the Bishop to confess to his part in Vallier's death and the lies he told that put Simon in prison.

Similarly, *My Winnipeg* is not merely a story of celebration of Guy's (Darcy Fehr) childhood home and city. Instead the narrator, Guy himself, is filming a documentary in order to break away from the inescapable magnetic hold that Winnipeg has on him. Guy explains that he has been unsuccessfully trying to get out of Winnipeg. In a last-ditch attempt, Guy decides to "film his way out" (*My Winnipeg*). He is hoping that by filming a documentary he can record all of his childhood memories, be the audience of this documentary-making process, 'vivisect' (*My Winnipeg*) his own childhood, and get away. The documentary is a double-edged tool, as it

at once comes to contain all of Guy's memories of Winnipeg and is also the text by which Guy can tell and watch the story of his escape from Winnipeg.

While both productions contain personal stories about the past, just as *The Hanging Garden* and *Marion Bridge* do, they are not created to assert a personal belief about the past. Instead, these works are specifically constructed as tools to be used on audiences in the present in order to facilitate a future confession and escape. These are Guy's and Simon's stories, told in the present about the past in order to facilitate a change in the present. In this chapter I will argue that both *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg* are films about the production of a memory tool for an audience within the film, and that the degree to which these memory tools achieve their goal of revenge or escape is reflected in how the audience chooses to dispute the memory being produced and the degree to which audience members become immersed in the memories that the productions spark. As in the last chapter, exploring how memories are utilized within these two films is key to illustrating how the films tell their memory tales and how User Reviewers respond, regardless of accuracy, to these memory tellings in their writing.

Annette Kuhn has written about how memories are performed as what she calls "memory works." Kuhn writes "Memory work is a conscious and purposeful staging of memory" ("Memory Texts" 186). Both the play in *Lilies* and the documentary that is being produced in *My Winnipeg* are created for an explicit purpose. For Simon the goal is revenge for his lover's murder and Simon's lengthy imprisonment; for Guy, the goal is to escape the memories he feels are holding him in Winnipeg. These memory-based productions are staged and shaped to facilitate the goal of revenge and escape in the present. Kuhn goes on to discuss the goal of a memory work: "Memory work undercuts assumptions about the transparency or

the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as ‘truth’ but as evidence of a particular source. Material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and possibilities” (6). Both of these *memory works* are focused not on coming to a specific truth about the past but are instead about ‘interrogating and mining’ the past in the present in order to facilitate a release from the guilt of a lover’s death and the captivating hold of a childhood home in the future. Three time periods collide in these memory productions and the films that contain them. Simon’s play and Guy’s documentary are created in the present tense of the film, through the artist’s present–tense understanding of and use of memories. Both spin tales about the past, staging it as an argument to support a change in the future. The success of the productions depends on the degree to which the memory can be employed in the present in service of their goals. This is not the past presented as a historical truth. Instead, as director Guy Maddin explains in an interview with Alison Gilmour, “It’s all true as long as it helps us get at what’s happened and what could happen.”

The goal of Simon’s memory play in *Lilies* is revenge and a confession, although the latter is not obvious at the outset. The Bishop arrives at the prison with the assumption that he is there to hear the confession of an old and dying Simon; however, once he is in the assumed safety of the confessional booth, he is unsuccessful at urging Simon towards one. Instead Simon explains “I am about to commit the sin of revenge. There is going to be sacrilege. There is going to be lots of forbidden memories and remorse.” Simon is going to use the forbidden memories as a tool to exact revenge against the Bishop. Through the play Simon can watch the Bishop suffer as he himself has and finally confess to the murder and subsequent lies, clearing Simon of the crime he has spent forty years paying for.

Guy's goal in creating a documentary film out of his childhood memories within *My Winnipeg* is not to seek revenge but to facilitate his escape. Guy explicitly states that he wishes to "escape the magnetic pole of his mother from which he cannot turn" and the hold that the city itself has over him. He explains that he has "to make my way through town. Through everything I've seen and lived. Everything I've loved and forgotten. Through the thick furry frost and out to the city limits. Then I am out of here." Guy's goal is to get out of town, and his plan is to do it by creating a documentary – a memory work about his childhood that will allow him to assert narrative control over the past and its hold on the present.

Producing Memories

Both films foreground the means of producing the play within the film and the documentary within the documentary. Discussions about filmmaking, scripting, casting, and staging the play show the viewer that this is a work of fiction, told from the perspective of one character, and is not to be relied upon as any kind of historical truth. As the inmate who plays Lydie–Anne in *Lilies* explains about the questionable truth of Simon and Vallier's love story, it doesn't matter that it's not accurate because "it's so beautiful." Here the production of a good story that achieves its goal is more important than any truth. It is how the memories are employed in the service of the goal that matters. Repeatedly foregrounding the means of production allows the viewer to be distanced from the production rather than completely immersed in it as though it were true. As Greyson explains in an interview discussing his body of films, "These devices are meant to keep you critical, keep you engaged, and make you think about who writes history, who is in charge of which stories" (Zaiontz and Halferty 194).

It is impossible to miss the means of production in *My Winnipeg*. In fact, the film repeatedly refuses to allow the viewer to trust the story being told. Instead, the film interjects comments and visuals that refer to the film's production, the narrator frames every scene of the film, explaining his process, and the narration often discusses the transience and unreliability of memory, all the while creating a production out of memory. This foregrounding of the means of production results in the viewer never being able to forget that this is Guy's story and his narrative control.

My Winnipeg opens with a director's clapper board that snaps down in front of actress Ann Savage's face as she rehearses a scene for Guy's documentary. It is unclear whether this is a scene for *My Winnipeg* or the documentary Guy is making within the film. Either way, it works to show that despite this being a documentary, Savage is performing, and that her performance is scripted and shaped by the director.

The clapperboard returns later in the film, while Guy is filming scenes for his memory work at 800 Ellice, his childhood home. It is in the scenes filmed at 800 Ellice and the prep work around them that the film most explicitly shows the means of staging the documentary Guy says he is making. Guy explains that he rents the house in order to recreate "the archetypal episodes from my family history" in order to re-watch his childhood and try to understand the hold it has over him. He explains that he rents similar furniture to that which he had in his childhood, which he says is a tax write-off since he is a filmmaker. He even says that he has exhumed the body of his dead father and put him under the rug for authenticity, and hires look-alike actors to play his siblings. Then Guy goes about scripting the scenes of his childhood and having the actors perform them while he watches his memories come alive, "mining" them

for understanding despite the fact that he wrote and produced the work himself. After filming scenes he explains that he records the effects on each of the actors and himself in a journal. The journal is shown on screen with pencil markings and filmmaking equipment in the background. Not only are these scenes produced, scripted and directed, they are further interpreted for the audience. In fact, Guy's interpretation frames the entire film. Guy at once produces the film, creates the shooting schedule, picks the scenes, scripts the scenes, and edits the film, but he also then comments on the entire production. Even when Ann Savage, as his mother, disagrees with a piece of dialogue, the narrator refutes and frames her disagreement within the overall project, while filtering her comments. There is no room for disparate voices in this memory work, as it is entirely Guy's memory being deployed.

Simon's memories are similarly deployed in his memory production. While Simon does not control his play through voice-over narration, he does control the production, as it is his script and direction being used. The means of production in *Lilies* is shown through the staging and discussions about scripting and hiring actors. Shortly after the Bishop enters the confessional booth, Simon explains that in forty years he has "had time to think about words." This play that he is about to have performed has been well worded — well scripted. In addition to writing the play, the actors later explain the selection process Simon went through in casting his play, and the actors further tell of the difficulty they had in obtaining props, specifically corsets, from within the prison system, as they are forbidden due to suicide risk. The risks to the prison Chaplain are also apparent, as he is seen nervously trying to clean his glasses as he gives direction to begin the play, and later when he tells Simon that he will shut it down if Simon cannot control the inmate actors.

The means of production of the play are visible in its staging within the prison chapel. The fencing around the sanctuary is used as a background wall, the confessional is used as a theatre chair and viewing frame for both Simon and the Bishop, and the props are rudimentary, from a faulty slide projector to create backgrounds, to a papier maché balloon on a horizontal rope hanging from the ceiling and flooding the chapel floor to create the lake of Roberval. In foregrounding the means of production, Simon's control over the narration of his memories is made clear just as Guy's control over his documentary was in *My Winnipeg*.

Even in the scenes in 1912 Roberval, the means of production is still evident. The actors who perform in the 1912 scenes remain the same as those featured in the prison performance. And although the surroundings and costumes are far lusher, the sounds travel between the two sets. This is a story being produced from a singular perspective. Simon is in charge here.

In addition to the actors performing in both scenes, sound travels across them, showing the viewer that this remains part of a production. Early in the performance, the Bishop kicks at the confessional door, trying to escape. He does so just at the moment that Simon kisses Lydie—Anne for the first time, and although that scene takes place in Roberval 1912, the sound of the Bishop in the prison kicking the door is heard there too. This is a production in which the audience within the film is watching and commenting; the audience can be heard across the proscenium arch.

That this is a production is also evident when Simon's memory play narrates episodes which he could not have had any actual experience of, if they even occurred at all. There are several scenes like this. Early in the film, there is a scene in the boys' coat room at the school in Roberval. Bilodeau (Matthew Ferguson) looks into a picture of Jesus on the wall and prays/rants

about Simon. Another scene shows Bilodeau later that day at the school. Simon's play shows Bilodeau directing Simon's father (Gary Farmer) to where Simon is hiding. From the school attic where Simon is located he would have had no knowledge of this exchange transpiring. In fact, according to the Bishop, it did not. Later in the film there is yet another scene, this time with Lydie-Anne and the Countess de Tilly, where they discuss their mutual betrayal at the hands of men they loved. Simon again would not have been present for this exchange, should it have occurred. The exchange between the two women provides an opportunity to discuss the effects of lying men. As this is a production and the goal of Simon's fabrication is to tell an effective and cohesive story, he is filling in information to elicit a response from the audience, regardless of continuity. As mentioned, this discussion relates to the goal of his memory production rather than an attempt at historical accuracy.

Target Audiences

In order to exact revenge, confession, or escape, Simon's and Guy's memory productions both require a specific audience. This audience, in each case, was part of the original events that the playwright and documentarist are now re-telling from their memories. It is for this audience that the memory works are produced and their response that Guy and Simon seek in order to be released from the past that haunts them. Within both films there are several audiences: the primary audience for whom the work is produced, the producers of the memory work, and the actors in the production. Although the play and the documentary are both specifically produced for their primary audience of the Bishop and Guy, the other audiences of the productions come to play a role in the success of the memory tool by their engagement with it.

The primary audience of Simon's play is the Bishop. The Bishop is brought to the prison under false pretense and then trapped in the confessional booth from which he watches the first scenes of the play. He has no choice but to "enjoy the show" as Simon puts it. The first glimpses he has of the production are through a small square opening in the confessional door, through which the camera picks up his perspective, panning out into the prison chapel in a way which resembles the curtains on a stage production pulling back. At first a reluctant audience, the Bishop resists, interrupting the play and disputing it, but he comes to be actively involved in the production of memory within the film.

Simon is also a member of the audience. Like the Bishop, he initially watches from inside the confessional, but he soon moves out, watching the rest of the show as well as observing his childhood betrayer as the inmate actors "refresh his memory." Finally, the actors at times become audience members to this production. It is clear from their commitment to Simon's "beautiful story" and the risk they take in participating in it that these actors are very dedicated. When not on stage, they are seen working as stage hands or watching the show outright. Particularly in the scene in which the adolescent Simon confesses his love for Vallier, all of the actors stand behind Simon and the Bishop, looking on as their tale slips into a deeply nostalgic moment for Simon. Again, as the production comes to a halt, waiting for the Bishop to finish the story, the actors crowd around the Bishop and Simon, eager to hear the end of the story as told by the actual murderer. These actors have no embodied experience of what may have transpired in Roberval in 1912, but they are clearly invested in exacting the revenge and confession that the memory production they have been part of is about to commit.

The inmate actor most invested in the success of this memory tool is Bilodeau. He too is an audience member for this production, but his focus is not on the play he is in, but on watching the person he is portraying as he watches the memory production. Unlike the other actors in the play, Bilodeau directly addresses the Bishop within the play in several scenes. Early in the film he goes right up to the confessional window and mocks the Bishop, and later at the engagement party he insists on pouring the Bishop wine despite the fact that the Bishop has said “no.”

There is only one diegetic audience member watching Guy’s escape documentary in *My Winnipeg*. Guy, as producer and narrator of his film, is also watching the process of his memory work come together, observing his reactions so that he can get out of town. During his first experiment at 800 Ellice he scripts and films a re-enactment of the “straightening of the hall runner,” a routine event from his childhood. During this episode the actors and mother go through the scripted motions of trying to make the carpet straight enough for Guy’s mother’s approval. Of course it can never be quite right, but the actors play along unfazed. However, from behind the camera within the film, Guy tells us that he alone gets irritated and therefore considers this experiment a success, even though the actors don’t get nearly as irritated as he remembers his real siblings becoming. What is important here is not their reaction but Guy’s, as the audience of this film production. Guy continues through the film to observe himself as he revisits sites of his childhood, not for the truth of what is filmed, but for his reactions, in hopes that “if only I could pay attention to where I am going, where I’ve been, I could get out of here.” When the diegetic audience engages in the memory being produced, the goal will be achieved.

Theatre Interruptus

The first signs of engagement in the memory work are moments when the audience either interrupts it or disputes the production. These disruptions serve to dispute the authenticity of the memory work in order to challenge its production. However, they have the opposite effect, because in challenging the memory's authenticity they show that they have begun to engage in the act of remembering, something that must take place if these memory productions are to be effective in exacting the revenge, confession, or escape they are designed to achieve.

Guy's memory tool, his documentary about Winnipeg, is disputed by its sole audience member, Guy himself, as he questions his own memory of events, and by Guy's narration of the metaphors of the city, which engage in a discourse about the transience of memory. The landscape of Winnipeg, according to Guy, is a landscape of constant remembering and forgetting: a place "stupefied by nostalgia." The voice-over explains, alongside grainy images of out-of-focus and overlaid maps, that in Winnipeg there are rivers beneath rivers, which meet with other rivers beneath other rivers, making "forks beneath the forks." Echoing a buried past, a bridge that crosses the Assiniboine creaks in the extreme cold because it remembers the heat of the climate of the Nile it was designed to cross. Guy explains that Winnipeg is a city that refuses to destroy old signage, and instead old signs remain decaying reminders of businesses and products that no longer exist. Former tenants keep old keys in case they forget where they live now, and people get lost in the "forgetfulness of our snow." Snow as a medium of forgetting and remembering is used repeatedly in the film to question the reliability of memory. Snow is seen both covering the ground and falling on screen, like the "furry frost" that Guy says he has trouble seeing through.

Guy also explains the phenomenon of what he calls “snow declivities,” which are places where a person or dog has walked on fresh snow, packing it down. Then, when the snow around it melts or blows away, the packed-down footprint remains as a negative impression of a path someone walked. Ultimately, these “snow fossils” melt. As markers of history they are unreliable, just as the buildings of Guy’s childhood that fall to the wrecking ball and dynamite onscreen in the film are unreliable. If the snow declivities melt and the buildings fall, Garbage Hill is caught heaving up its covered-over memories. According to Guy’s narration, children go tobogganing down Garbage Hill, a hill made up of rubble covered over with grass and turned into a park. Guy explains that children are sometimes impaled on objects of garbage once hidden underneath but heaved up by thawing and freezing, memories suddenly and dangerously thrust into the present. According to Guy, Winnipeg is a city caught between remembering and forgetting and the unreliability of both.

Guy’s narration of the transience and unreliability of memory of the city is paralleled by his questioning of his own memories. Early in the film, Guy is depicted as confident in his own account of events. During the filming at 800 Ellice, Guy becomes frustrated with what the intertitles of the film describe as his mother’s deliberate “sabotage” of his project. Mother keeps going off script, fumbling her lines and making mistakes. Guy explains that it is her “refusal to acknowledge the real past.” At this early stage of the production of his memory work, Guy is confident in his recollections, sure that his script contains the truth of what happened. But Guy’s confidence in his own memories begins to fade. In a later scene, Guy watches his mother and sister (Amy Stewart) re-enact a scripted scene about Janet returning home after she hit a deer with her car. Guy explains that at the time he sided with his sister, but

after watching the re-enactment that he staged and scripted, he wonders if his mother had actually deduced “the real party” (*My Winnipeg*), and if his understanding of what happened that night might not have been accurate, as accurate as his analysis of this re-enactment. By the end of the film, Guy is questioning everything. As the film ends, the voice-over states “I never did know anything for sure” and “sometimes I forget.” The voice-over admits this as photos of Guy’s childhood family (they are Maddin’s own photos) float on screen. These archival images contrast Guy’s comments about the unreliability of his own memory, while the film footage and narration convey much greater confidence. When creating a memory work in order to find his way out of Winnipeg, the reliability of Guy’s memory is not as important as the act of remembering; however, when faced with a real and very personal ‘memory text,’ Guy is unable to construct a narration. This inability to remember is another disruption in the production of the memory work – in fact it is the last, as the film ends shortly after this statement.

When the audience disrupts the memory play in *Lilies* it is not to discuss the transience of memory but to refute the narrative of the play itself. As the primary audience member, the Bishop is responsible for most of the moments when the play’s staging is interrupted. At first the Bishop resists the play, to question the value of remembering his and Simon’s shared youth, and then he goes on to dispute aspects about the story. Both disruptions show that the Bishop’s memory of what happened has been sparked, and he either doesn’t want to have to think about it anymore, or wants to undermine the story Simon has told in order to prevent Simon from exacting his revenge and forcing the Bishop’s confession.

The Bishop's first disruption of the memory play occurs even before it begins. Simon asks the Bishop if he remembers staging the play of Saint Sebastian. The Bishop tells Simon "those are memories long forgotten." This is a telling comment. If the Bishop can remember that they are forgotten memories, then they haven't really been forgotten. Later, when the Bishop breaks free of the confessional, he again questions the value of recreating this memory. He says "We were children. Why revive all this now?" Responding to this comment, Simon is quite clear. He tells the Bishop "I want you to admit what you did." This retort puts an end to the Bishop's challenging the worth of the memory play, but not his critique of its content. Twice the Bishop interrupts the production to dispute aspects of the story he feels are inaccurate. The first is to redeem him from an accusation that the play makes of him. Simon's play shows Bilodeau at the boys' school the day that Simon's father beats him. In the play, Bilodeau tells Timothée where to find Simon. The Bishop interrupts the play, saying "I'd never lead your father to you." Simon responds to this by stating "so you were at the school that day." Simon goes on to accuse the Bishop of lying at his trial, as he said he was not at the school that day. In disputing the memory play, the Bishop has inadvertently admitted to lying at Simon's trial. That is his first confession, and it shows that the Bishop has remembered that day at the school, regardless of the historical accuracy of Simon's play. The next disruption is less accusatory and does not stop action onstage. In the final scene within the prison, where Vallier and Simon admit their feelings for one another in the bathtub, the Bishop comments on the discrepancy in Vallier's size, saying "He was heavier than that man." This small observation does not question the validity of the story as much as it illustrates that the Bishop is remembering the real Vallier.

The Audience Remembers

The disruptions that audience members make within the production show that memories have been sparked, and once this has occurred, the means of production of the play within the film and the documentary within the film become less pronounced, and the production begins to flow in a new way. However, despite the fact that these scenes appear to be unproduced stream of conscious memories in the case of *My Winnipeg* and flashbacks in the case of *Lilies*, they remain part of the memory production. Greyson describes these sections as “Fantastical Hallucinations” (Zainot and Halferty 187) and Maddin as “docufantasia.” In these moments, the production is still visible, through the manipulation of the images seen on screen in *My Winnipeg* and the presence of the inmate actors and diegetic audience in *Lilies*. The effect is to show that the audience is so deeply immersed in the memory production that they have begun to see the production through their own memory – colouring and shading it as necessary. The memory production has facilitated a total recall, something that is necessary if the memory of the past is to facilitate a confession and an escape in the present.

In *My Winnipeg* the narrator ceases to discuss his process in making the film and simply narrates the images seen on screen, telling about childhood memories as if they are bubbling up as he speaks, rather than scripted to match the images on screen. However, the images show something else. When Guy narrates the Winnipeg General Strike and its connection to Saint Mary’s Academy for Girls, he does so as if he is teaching a history lesson. He explains the dispute between the workers and employers using news headlines on screen. The story begins quite credibly, but then veers off into an unlikely history of strike–induced heavy drinking and fear of paedophilia. As Guy explains the fear that the parents and nuns had for the safety of the

girls at the school adjacent to the demonstration, the visuals change. As Guy narrates the untold story of the strike, of how the Bolshevik strikers drank too much and broke down the barriers of S.M.A.G. in order to sexually assault the schoolgirls residing there, the news footage is replaced with comical puppets with erections shot through cut-out key-holes against a red screen. While Guy may be narrating a Winnipeg memory, the credibility of that memory which streams onscreen is undermined by the images used to illustrate it.

Guy also appears to be narrating a memory rather than producing a documentary in his depiction of the Golden Boy contests. For these scenes, Guy narrates the history of the contest and Mayor Cornish's involvement, as what appears to be found footage of the actual contest plays on screen. The footage is grainy and looping as if it were archival; however, the actor playing Cornish is seen in several scenes in the film in a very ill-fitting large fake beard. This beard undermines the authenticity of the images and Guy's vocal reminiscences, reminding viewers that this is a memory production.

The almost authentic look of these images and the memory tale Guy tells are so powerful that a number of writers about this film have admitted to checking Guy's and Maddin's historical accounts. Roger Ebert writes of the film:

Is that true? It's as true as anything else in the film. My friend Tony Scott of the *New York Times* thought he should check out some of the facts in "My Winnipeg," but decided not to. Why should he doubt the film? I certainly believe that after a stable fire at a racetrack, terrified horses stampeded into a freezing river and were frozen in place. Their unanimous conclusion is that the authenticity of the story does not matter as much as the fact that it is Guy's memory to tell, regardless of accuracy. Or, as the quotation from Deleuze

explained at the outset of this chapter, memories are constituted in the present in the context of that present.

The present context of the memory play within the prison cannot be broken, as Simon and the Bishop appear to move out of the production into a joint flashback of their collective past in Roberval. In *Lilies* these scenes of total immersion into the memory production show a shift to an imagined setting. The inmate actors, along with Simon and the Bishop, appear to travel outside of the prison and to Roberval 1912, where they perform and watch the play, seamlessly returning to the prison periodically. Some writers have described these scenes as flashbacks (Klemm 2, Morgan 6, and Loïselle 178), and in many senses they do appear to be flashbacks. As discussed in the Introduction, Maureen Turim describes a flashback as “a representation of the past that intervenes within the present flow of the film narrative” (2). The scenes in Roberval appear to exist in the past; however, I argue that they are not flashbacks, as the past is not intervening into the present tense of the film. Instead, the Roberval scenes cannot be separated from the scenes within the prison chapel. Firstly, the inmate actors remain the same in both settings. Not only do male actors continue to play the female parts in remembered 1912, the young Simon, who is still played by the inmate actor, has no accent, a discrepancy that is believable within the prison play; but if this were a true flashback, the accent the senior Simon has would have been preserved.

Finally, I would argue that these are not flashbacks because of the interaction between actors and the diegetic audience within the flashback. In a scene within the prison, Bilodeau directly addresses the Bishop onstage, yelling in his face “enough,” mocking the Bishop’s own outburst. As explained above, a similar direct address between the actor playing Bilodeau and

the Bishop occurs in the engagement scene in 1912 Roberval. In this instance, the Bishop refuses the wine Bilodeau offers to pour him. Instead of listening, Bilodeau looks him square in the face and pours deliberately. If this were a conventional flashback, not only would the person who was experiencing the flashback not appear in the scene, but the characters in that flashback would not address them.

Brownlee has argued that these scenes are not flashbacks but fantasies. Brownlee's reasoning is that "the performers are the same in both registers because the story of Simon and the Bishop's youth is represented through re-enactment rather than *flashback*" (4), and in the notes she writes "The importance of this distinction was reinforced, for me, by speaking with John Greyson about the film" (4). Rather than flashbacks, she says that "these represent the older Simon and Bilodeau's shared memories of these spaces" (16). If memories are constituted in the context of the present and are about the past, then these scenes in Roberval 1912 are the Bishop's and Simon's memories of that time, motivated by the memory play they have been watching. As Morgan writes, the film "positions the historical trauma in all its uncertainty through the play of memory" (6). The actors remain the same, but the scenery becomes lush and the costumes more detailed and elaborate as the memory fills in the areas that the play, given its incarcerated status, could not. The scenes of the play within the prison are occurring onstage, but when Simon and the Bishop begin the act of remembering, the setting changes from their perspective, adding memories of the actual spaces to their perspective of the stage production. This is illustrated in the film in the ways in which the Bishop and Simon move between the remembered 1912 Roberval and the memory play in the prison.

The most striking move into remembering is when the confessional roof comes off. The actor Bilodeau has just completed a monologue about Roberval and the life of his character. He ends the speech by saying "I'll never forget the arrival of that woman in a balloon. Never." The "never forget" spoken by the actor playing the childhood Bishop is coinciding with the roof coming off the confessional. The Bishop stands up and looks out the top at the balloon floating across the sky. This scene is clearly from the Bishop's perspective. It is his sightline that the camera picks up as it moves out of the confessional. The Bishop, however, remains firmly locked in the confessional. The play has motivated a memory of Roberval, and the Bishop travels there through it.

There are two key features to how these motivated memories occur. The first is that they are all motivated by the play, and second that the perspective of the rememberer is maintained even in the scenes in Roberval. Once the Bishop is released from his incarceration in the confessional, Simon arranges for the confessional bench to be placed at the edge of the stage. This bench will be where both men sit to watch the rest of the play. Sitting side by side with the Bishop on the bench, Simon lights a match, and from the flame they are transported into the rafters, where the inmate actor Simon is holding a match to a beam in the school attic. The match is at once a cue to the actors to begin and to the audience within the film to remember; it is used several times when Simon and the Bishop move to the remembered Roberval scenes.

If the match facilitates moving between prison scenes and those enhanced by memories of 1912 Roberval, the bench maintains perspective. In both settings the Bishop and Simon remain seated or near the bench. They sit on the bench watching the convent burn down, and

from the bench they watch the sun come up as the volunteer firefighters clean up in the river. They attend the engagement party dinner on the bench, and the same bench is the vantage point from which they watch the love scene within the prison walls. When Simon and the Bishop do leave the bench, their perspective as observers of this play is maintained. As Lydie–Anne and the Countess commiserate about lying men, the Bishop and Simon are seen watching through a doorway in the background. To support this perspective, Greyson’s camera repeatedly records close–ups on both men’s faces, registering their response to the play’s material and then turning to show what they were looking at – a separation. This maintains a distance and perspective between the viewer and the play that would not be evident in a flashback. This separation shows that the memory play that Simon is producing is ongoing. This remains a production geared to a confession rather than simply a tragic and nostalgic tale. However, the degree to which the Bishop has been immersed into these memories is a sign that Simon’s goal of memory revenge is working.

Simon will get his confession because his memory play has “revived” the Bishop’s memory. We see this memory playing out on the Roberval stage at the end of the film, when the Bishop recounts how he attempted the murder of both Vallier and Simon but ultimately rescued Simon, deliberately leaving Vallier to die. This is the confession that Simon had wanted and the motivation for his memory–sparking play. Simon’s revenge of remembering is a success and facilitates the future confession he desired. As the film moves beyond the stage where the memory work played out, Simon’s perspective is maintained even though his telling is over. However, as will be shown in the next two chapters, when User Reviewers respond to this tale and the film’s privileging of Simon’s memory work they do not maintain that perspective.

Instead, viewers consider the perspective of other actors in the play even though the Bishop has ultimately verified Simon's telling of the memory.

Guy's memories are sparked by his documentary, but whether or not the goal of his memory production is met is unclear. Guy, having begun his documentary with the intent of facilitating his escape, ends the film with himself at first wishing for the Winnipeg of his childhood to be restored and cared for by the imaginary Citizen Girl, but ultimately Guy finishes the film with photos of his childhood and questions about the elusive nature of memory. Guy has not come to some truth about his past; in fact, he has through his scripted and filmed production come to create more questions about his memories than he has found means to escape. There is no shot of Guy leaving town. In fact, director Maddin writes of his home town "I don't know if you can get out of Winnipeg. The trains don't go out. They just loop around the Perimeter and come back" (Gilmour).

If the success of Guy's documentary in facilitating a grand escape is unclear, Simon's play is a complete success. Through his staging of possible past events, Simon successfully sparks the Bishop's memory, and Simon receives his confession. The play, about forty years into the past, sparked powerful memories in the present, and the Bishop admitted his crimes of both murder and lying at Simon's trial. Simon successfully committed the revenge of remembering on the Bishop, a revenge he completes by refusing to kill the Bishop and release him from newly remembering his guilt.

However, like Guy's, Simon's future is not clear. The actors and the priest have heard the confession, but whether or not Simon will ever be pardoned is not discussed. Like Sweet

William and Agnes, Simon and Guy can't escape their memories and the impact of past traumatic events on the present, even after successfully re-narrating them.

All four protagonists, Agnes, Sweet William, Simon and Guy, assert control over their memory narratives and works, and the films that portray them maintain that privileging through filmic techniques. However, despite this dominating memory narrative, User Reviewers of the films on the IMDb do not maintain this privileged memory in their writing. Instead, as will be shown in the next chapter, viewers contest and question the privileged narrative. Through textual analysis of the hundreds of film reviews written about these films, it becomes evident that User Reviewers do not simply recount the films they watched, but rather their practice is to engage with and interpret the films through their own memories and experiences.

Chapter 4

Engaging in Movie Memories: An Analysis of User Reviews of *Marion Bridge*, *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, and *My Winnipeg*

Marion Bridge, *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, and *My Winnipeg* tell stories about their protagonists' memories of their traumatic childhoods. Agnes in *Marion Bridge* and Sweet William in *The Hanging Garden* return to Nova Scotia and their childhood homes, a return that sparks them to recall and assert their narratives of what happened to them more than a decade earlier in an effort to make narrative sense of the trauma that haunts them. *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* tell the story of Agnes's and Sweet William's memory exploration. Simon in *Lilies* and Guy in *My Winnipeg* narrate the stories of their troubled childhoods more formally with memory works. Simon creates a play and Guy films a documentary in order to assert narrative control over their stories and achieve revenge and escape, respectively. The memory tales these stories depict are very clearly told from the perspective of their protagonist narrating their past in an effort to come to narrative understanding of traumatic events and cease to be haunted by them. However, when viewers write about these films in electronically published User Reviews on the IMDb.com, the narrative control that the films privilege and the characters require to escape from the past that consumes them is not always maintained. In fact, User Reviewers of *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* respond to the tales of memory exploration that Agnes and Sweet William share by problematizing the characters' accounts through challenging them or accusing the protagonists of being to blame for their experiences. Similarly, User Reviews of *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg* write of Simon's and Guy's memory works as stories of shared past events, devoid of perspective or authorship and historically truthful –

even when User Reviewers find historically reliable information that refutes their stories. Based on a discursive analysis of User Reviews found on the IMDb.com, viewers respond differently to memory tales of the four films included in this project depending on the format in which they are presented. The carefully curated *memory works* depicted in *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg* are written about as more reliable historical or autobiographical accounts than the slowly emerging memories explorations in *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* that are contested by viewers. In both cases the viewers writing these User Reviews question and challenge rather than uphold the perspective the films carefully maintain. Like the gap between the protagonists, their families and peers, User Reviewers remember the memories stories told in these films differently despite the films' privileging of the protagonists' versions of events. These User Reviews demonstrate that the largely single-perspective exploration of memory in *Marion Bridge*, *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, and *My Winnipeg* ceases to become the individual memories of the protagonists but instead are now User Reviewers' own recollections of the memory tales, their memories of watching the films and recalling the memories they spark.

User Reviews are full of information about how the review writers have responded to and interpreted aspects of the films they write about. The IMDb.com provides a tool for content creation and also provides some guidelines for User Reviewers when creating content; however, the site does not promise to enforce their rules. IMDb.com suggests that User Reviewers create texts that are 50–500 characters in length, that they contain no profanity or insulting comments, that they leak no personal information, and that they do not include opinions about historical events or the subject matter of the films. However, IMDb.com also clearly states that it “has the right but not the obligation to monitor and edit or remove any

activity or content” (Terms and Conditions of Use, imdb.com). Instead, the site relies on visitors to monitor each other, leaving these guidelines rather innocuous. User Reviewers are thus relatively free to write about the films they review. User reviews are also not edited for grammatical or stylistic errors; therefore for the purposes of this research, quotations from IMDb are included exactly as they appear on IMDb, including all typing and grammatical inconsistencies.

As discussed above, there is very little verifiable information about any reviewer that will ever be known. Instead, all that exists is each text and how it aligns or differs, and in some cases responds to the other reviewers listed on the page. Bruns writes of sites like IMDb.com that the content they publish on behalf of Users becomes like “archives, enabling users to trace the evolution of content through its various stages, so that the continuous development of new versions of content leads to the creation of a palimpsest: a repeatedly over-written, multilayered document” (3). The reviews in the archive are texts for analysis that on examination reveal trends and themes in how reviewers write about the memory tale each film tells. As explained in further detail in the introduction, Joke Hermes calls this kind of research ‘civic research’ rather than audience studies. Hermes explains that ‘civic research’ “work[s] with and on behalf of media users” (83) and seeks, like good audience research, “to understand what makes particular practices of media use meaningful, and second, what these reconstructions of the meanings of media texts and routines of media tell us about contemporary society” (83).

The full list of User Reviews for each film is included in the Appendices following the Works Cited. User Reviews are included exactly as they appear on the IMDb.com and all typos, misspellings, and errors are copied from the originals.

***Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden: A Runaway's* memories are not to be trusted**

As they re-encounter their past through their memory exploration, Agnes and Sweet William very clearly state their memories, whether to their respective sisters, family, or old friends. These two characters assert their stories of traumatic sexual abuse, and the films' narrative and visual structure reinforce their perspective as valid, privileging it over the contesting comments and gazes of other characters. However, based on a discursive analysis of User Reviews of the films found on IMDb.com, viewers write about the films' memory narratives from the multiple perspectives of family members or as a shared secret, rather than a survivor's story. Reviewers focus on the protagonists' poor choices or normalize their memories of trauma as just part of a childhood on the East Coast of Canada. A discursive analysis of User Reviews on IMDb.com shows that while these fictional traumatic memories may be intensely personal to the protagonists, as User Reviewers write of their memories of watching the films the focus widens and shifts away from a personal memory to a shared one that is critiqued and contested, denying the remembering agency of the protagonist the film focused on.

Most of the User Reviewers do not mention the protagonists' traumatic memories. Of the sixteen reviews of *Marion Bridge*, only one reviewer mentions Agnes's incestuous abuse, while six mention it as a horrible, shared secret, and nine make no mention at all. While the abuse is the key mystery to the film, it is unlikely that User Reviewers are avoiding leaking key plot points. User reviews regularly leak key information by simply starting with "spoiler alert."

This labeling system is used extensively in the reviews of *The Hanging Garden* even though those reviews do not mention Sweet William's abuse (Mallen 8486, Jotix 100, miler-5, Pogostiks, Python Hyena, Eric Rodriguez, Preppy-3). In fact, of the 29 User Reviews of *The Hanging Garden*, only two mention that Sweet William is taken to the prostitute by his mother, while four make some vague reference to the incident and twenty-three take no mention of the parentally sanctioned sexual encounter at all. This lack of mention of the abuse protagonists face may be related to User Reviewers relaying that the films are confusing. Regarding *The Hanging Garden*, one User Reviewer chose the title "Confusing but Compelling" (Python Hyena) and writes of the film as "good albeit confusing to me" (Mallen 8486) Similarly of *Marion Bridge*, gnostic21@hotmail.com titled their review "So subtle I'm still puzzled" and, although they were the only reviewer of the film to mention Agnes's abuse, indicated that "the crucial element of this movie, that 'Agnes' had borne an illegitimate child due to parental incest, was so subtle that I had trouble understanding it."

User Reviewers do consistently remember the films as being about a dark, mostly unnamed secret. When discussing *Marion Bridge*, User Reviewers repeatedly mention a past secret. Eplromeo criticizes the film's revealing of the secret, using phrases like "the revelation of the film's very dark secret was extremely anti-climactic." Of *The Hanging Garden*, writers describe the memory narrative as haunting. Python Hyena writes, "Intriguing yet confusing Canadian drama about a haunted family history" and Jotix 100, who includes a spoiler alert with their review, writes, "The message of the film seems to be how a family secret becomes the breaking point and its demise." Nothing is spoiled here, as the language is too vague to ruin the plot. In writing of the past trauma as a "secret," the trauma is left unnamed. Furthermore, just

as the fellow characters in the film resist talking about what had happened to Agnes and Sweet William, so too do the reviewers.

The protagonists' childhood traumas are also remembered by User Reviewers as shared traumas even though the films illustrate Sweet William's and Agnes's memories as personal, giving them screen time to explore their personal memories. Of Agnes's past, Tiger fish 50 writes "over the course of the film, the hidden narrative of the three sisters' family history is gradually illuminated" and The_Late_Buddy_Ryan writes, "MacIvor shows his characters coming to terms with an unpunished crime that's been oppressing them for half their lives." According to this User Reviewer, the crime has been oppressing them all, not just Agnes. Similarly, when writing of the *Hanging Garden*, Brigid O Sullivan writes "The message of the film revolves around the theme of family secrets," not Sweet William's secret but the whole family's. Echoing this, bgilch writes of the abuse as "a breach in family fabric that can't be woven back in." In writing of the films as shared secrets, User Reviewers do not maintain the protagonists' personal memory as told in the film. For the User Reviewer, it is no longer a character's memory but instead is the User Reviewer's own memory of engaging with the film and their own lives that they are retelling.

User Reviews of *The Hanging Garden* go even further than writing of a shared past trauma to take on the perspectives of other characters in the film when writing their reviews. In doing this they support the perspectives of those characters who resist Sweet William's assertion of his own memory. Jotix100 writes eloquently about the pain Sweet William's father (Peter MacNeill) faces: "The message of the film seems to be how a family secret becomes the breaking point and its demise. Whiskey Mac sees the hanging figure of his teenaged son right in

the middle of the garden.” Whiskey Mac’s loss is the focus, not Sweet William’s memory of ongoing abuse. User Reviewers also write about Rosemary’s experiences. Eric Rodriguez writes “Rosemary reveals to William that she opted to hold her wedding in the garden so as to remember her brother as he ‘left,’ rather than as he ‘came back.’” The scene that Rodriguez is referring to is the same scene in which Sweet William tells Rosemary that he did not opt to go to the prostitute, but he was forced into it. This perspective is left out of Rodriguez’s written memory of watching the film in favour of Rosemary’s.

User Reviewers also critique the credibility of the protagonists in both films effectively by discrediting the memories that the film privileges. Amongst reviews of *The Hanging Garden*, eleven of the twenty–nine User Reviewers discuss Sweet William’s sexuality, and the same number mention his adolescent obesity. These discussions relate to his decision to end his life. In fact, some reviewers question Sweet William’s motive in leaving home, returning home, and attempting suicide. Of Sweet William’s decision to leave home, Preppy–3 explains that “he left home because he was gay and couldn’t deal with his family’s HEAVY dysfunction.” Here there is no mention of the pain he suffered from his mother’s attempt at curing his same sex attraction or his father’s violence. This sentiment is echoed in the way reviewer Jotix100 explains Sweet William’s suicide attempt:

Sweet William, who as a teen ager is haunted by his latent homosexuality. The object of his interest is Fletcher, the school friend who isn't at all repulsed by William's advances, which are obvious. When they are caught in the act by the zealous grandmother, the family goes to pieces. Sweet William, in shame, hangs himself from a tree in the garden.

The source of the shame, according to Jotix 100, is his 'homosexuality' and getting caught, not the rejection he faces from Fletcher and his trip to the prostitute with his mother that both directly precede the suicide. Eric Rodriguez also critiques Sweet William's decisions, explaining that he writes of Sweet William's return home not for Rosemary's wedding but for reclaiming his childhood and revenge. Rodriguez writes that Sweet William

returns, reborn as a slim, handsome urbanite, who will not be satisfied until that rejection is reversed. Though in appearance a mature adult, William behaves at Rosemary's wedding as if he were trying to experience the childhood he missed. He is late for the ceremony, is dancing with his grandmother in her attic room while he is supposed to be with the rest of the wedding party, and hides under a table during the reception so he can throw flower petals onto the grass for guests to slip on. 'Sweet William' the adult sees his chance to put it all to rest when Fletcher comes on to him down on the dock, the site of an earlier affectionate encounter. After confirming that he holds great attraction over his brother-in-law, William fakes an asthma attack (he has no problem running up the hill), and goes to bury the corpse. Having given up on reliving the past in a more pleasant way, he opts for putting it to rest so he can start anew.

By indicating that Sweet William appears mature and acts otherwise, Rodriguez undermines Sweet William's credibility. The film never explicitly states why Sweet William left. The only indication would be the personal flashback that William has of the scenes before his suicide and his discussion with Rosemary about his abuse. That said, there is also no indication in the film that Sweet William was uncomfortable with his weight or his sexuality. But these are the reviewer's own interpretations and their resulting memories of watching the films.

In *Marion Bridge*, supporting characters provide plenty of material for User Reviewers to discredit Agnes's story. Theresa, for instance, repeatedly comments on Agnes's alcoholism. User Reviewers take on the position of the sister when writing of Agnes's story, foregrounding her alcoholism as central to her character. Of the 16 reviews of the film, drugs and alcohol are mentioned in 6 reviews, a much greater portion than the one that mentions Agnes' abuse.

When not discrediting the protagonists, User Reviewers' writings about their memories of the films normalize the protagonists' abusive childhood. Scheesma writes, "Marion Bridge to draw its strength from the real drama and humour found in everyday choices, characters and settings; as compromised and complex as life lived." Incestuous abuse, Scheesma implies, is an everyday choice.

User Reviews of *The Hanging Garden* take this farther, writing that "The Hanging Garden' is a slice-of-dysfunctional-life dramedy with a coming-of-age flashback which takes you into the tangled web of peculiar family matters and relationships of a Nova Scotia family." Parker links dysfunctional family, everyday life, and Nova Scotia into one thought. Harry-76 questions this as a Nova Scotia theme, writing "we experience a full portrait of the ultimate dysfunctional family. Are folks really like this, or is it just something in the Nova Scotian water?" bgilch effectively answers this question by writing:

shot through with the caustic self-wounding humour of the Maritimes, where I lived for six years. If this seems dour, then consider the take-off marriage sequence that opens the film: drunkenness, homoeroticism, Celtic music madness and four-dozen f-words. This film is a gorgeous if painful tribute to growing up in a remove that already seems past its age.

Discussing the films as realistic stories of typical dysfunctional East Coast families silences the trauma of both Agnes's and Sweet William's stories.

User Reviews of *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* contradict the quest for autonomy over the narrating of very personal, traumatic memories the films maintain. While these fictional childhood memories are intensely personal to the protagonists, who remain haunted by them, these User Reviews demonstrate that, once uttered and shared, these memories become intensely scrutinized, contested, normalized, and effectively blurred.

Lilies and My Winnipeg: Historical truth or at least beautiful

The trend towards silencing the telling of personal traumatic childhood memories is maintained in User Reviews of *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg*. However, in this case, rather than questioning the credibility of the protagonist, User Reviewers write about these as historical or autobiographical accounts without an author rather than a fictional work of memory. As in the previous two films, the abuse the protagonists depict is left largely unmentioned, and their perspective as narrators of their memory work is also not maintained in the reviewers' descriptions of the films. Instead, the memory works are largely written off as not having an author but being historical representations without an author. Reviewers of *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg* write of the films as a historical account of a terrible event in early twentieth-century Quebec, or of a city loved, or of the autobiographical recounting of a childhood by the actual director of the film, in the case of Guy Maddin's film – even going so far as to judge the validity of the events in the films against actual happenings. These reviewers respond to the memory work that Simon in *Lilies* and Guy in *My Winnipeg* carefully create in order to tell their

traumatic memories, but they do so not necessarily to write of the trauma the young men tell of, but to focus instead on the history they depict.

Just as the reviewers do not choose to write of Agnes's and Sweet William's abuse, reviews also do not feature Guy's emotional abuse from his mother and Simon's physical abuse from his father, the murder of Valier, and the betrayal that Bilodeau commits. The beating Simon is given by his father is mentioned in a mere 3 out of 41 reviews, although the reviewers who do choose to include this are very clear about the severity of this violence. Paz (Fuxing626) writes, "Simon's father discovers his son has kissed a boy and mutilates his body with a whip" and Richard E. Dodson writes that "Simon's father flogs him mercilessly." This is not the case for reviewers who write about Valier's death and Bilodeau's betrayal. Five out of forty-one reviewers make mention of these fictional events but are vague in their explanations. For instance, Paz (Fuxing626) writes "Bilodeau (the priest as an adolescent), unearths something of what the two lovers have been doing. He confronts them about it, calling them a "disease," when it is revealed later that he is more insidious than they are." Paz (Fuxing626) does not state what Bilodeau does and neither does Tesse, who writes "Lilies is about one man's horrible sin returning to haunt him, 40 years after the fact. As a rash child, young Jean Bilodeau did all he could to separate gay lovers Simon and Vallier– not for any high-minded moralistic reason, but out of his own jealousy and desire for Simon." There is no elaboration of what this sin is, just that Bilodeau wanted to separate the lovers.

Reviewers of *My Winnipeg* are equally vague when they write of the abuse and control the fictional character in the film is trying to escape. Only three out of twenty-eight reviewers write about this memory. Popcornihell writes of the character's "shrewish mother" and, more

vaguely, Polaris_DiB describes Winnipeg as the character Guy's "home and geographical Oedipal complex." By not writing about Guy's motivations User Reviewers do not focus on his goals. Guy's reasons for making his memory work are not the same as the Users' reasons for writing their own memory work about their film watching.

The few reviewers who choose to include information in their reviews about the abuse, betrayal, and entrapment the characters experience, no matter how vague, do maintain the point of view of the characters in the film who are sharing their intra-film memory works. However, most reviewers of the films, as was the case with *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden*, take the point of view of other characters in the film or of the city in which it is set, rather than exploring the very personal memory the characters have depicted.

Simon in *Lilies* has written, rehearsed, staged, and directed a full theatrical production to share his traumatic memory. Yet the reviewers choose to see the story Simon shares from the point of view of other characters. Bijou-2 takes on Bilodeau's point of view when addressing the story depicted in Simon's play "Indeed who is the true villain here? The jealous lover who killed for his love and became a priest in his atonement or the selfish and closeted Simone, who was dumping his true love after one beating from dad." While Simon does stop his visits with Valier when he begins his relationship with Lydie-Anne, there is no indication in the film that Bilodeau's becoming a priest is an atonement.

User Reviewer Tesse mentions the abuse Simon faced, but also writes of the play without acknowledging the playwright's perspective, indicating that this is both the Bishop's and Simon's history rather than a play written by an individual. Tesse writes "40 years later, Bilodeau and Simon meet again, and witness their history performed by prisoners in a

Quebecois jail . . . The cinematography of *Lilies* is flawless, moving effortlessly between 1952 and 1912.” Hanno Wupper echoes the shared perspective of Tesse’s review and expands it, explaining that there are points of view beyond the two male characters that include time periods and places: “Sometimes you are in the Bishop’s brain, sometimes in a Canadian hotel of 1914, sometimes in a prison in 1954.” Interestingly, Hanno Wupper never mentions seeing any of the story from Simon’s brain or his perspective.

Some reviewers of *Lilies* and *My Winnipeg* go beyond writing of the films as having multiple perspectives to considering them as having no author at all, an irony given that within the films an author of both the play and film within film is clearly stated. Of the 41 reviews of *Lilies*, 13 mention that the film has a play in it and 20 mention that within the film (not necessarily the play) there are male actors playing female roles, but only 3 include information about Simon as the playwright. Richard E. Dodson states that “Bilodeau...is held hostage in the local prison and forced to watch a play (written by Simon and performed by the inmates) that depicts the events of that fateful summer forty years earlier.” Richard E. Dodson shares in his review that the play has an author, but he then broadens his memories of the film by saying that it is about events, not memories, indicating that Simon in fact was acting more as a historian than a personal storyteller. Similarly, Marc (westerner) writes that Simon “put on a play that recreates events.” nycritic also writes of Simon as playwright, but not about the play about the prisoner’s memory, or even one about past events, but instead as a performed act of hate. nycritic writes of the play that it is a “carefully planned stage adaptation of the reasons he [Simon] hates you [Bilodeau] so much.” Without acknowledging the author of the play within

Lilies, Simon's perspective is not maintained but, when it is written about, it is just as a recorder of events or a spiteful act of revenge.

While in *Lilies* Simon is rarely mentioned as the playwright, *My Winnipeg* User Reviewers struggle with confusion between the director of *My Winnipeg* and the director-character within the film, once again blurring the perspective of just who is creating the memory work. *My Winnipeg* is narrated largely using interior monologue by the character of Guy. Guy explains in the voice-over that he is working on a film to facilitate his escape from his childhood home, his childhood city, and his memories of childhood. However, Guy's quest to create a film within the film in order to escape from the haunting memories of his childhood is only mentioned in one out of twenty-eight reviews of the film. That sole reviewer, Hooper450, explains that "the film opens with the director hurriedly explaining that he needs to, has to leave forever. But he can't bring himself to do it. The solution? He'll hire actors to recreate scenes from his childhood, in a desperate attempt to attain some obscure kind of closure." Hooper450 writes of the film Guy is creating but never explicitly states in the review which director he is talking about – Guy Maddin, director of *My Winnipeg*, or Guy the character within the film. MisterWhiplash questions the character of the director within the film, writing: "In the case of *My Winnipeg* he takes a character on a train as the centerpiece (very loosely one at that) and transposes on him going through history – of the city of Winnipeg, of childhood, and of his own sort of mental state connected to both. This "character" of sorts, if he even is one, is making a film about his family." Andres Salama also questions the director within the film, writing "the plot has an alter ego of the director." Still other reviewers equate the director of *My Winnipeg* with the character of the same name. Harry T. Yung writes:

Director Maddin's personal attribute to his home town is a tapestry with three themes developing in parallel, and interwoven. The first is Maddin's surreal dreamy visions while reclining in his seat on a train leaving Winnipeg. The second is a kaleidoscope on the history of Winnipeg – endearing, joyful, absurd, exasperating, among other things. Finally, there is a re-enactment of scenes from Maddin's own intriguing childhood.

Harry T. Yung's lack of distinction between director and character of director is mirrored and made more explicit in BandofInsiders's review of the film: "In *My Winnipeg* Guy Maddin takes up the task of vicariously reliving his childhood through making a movie re-creating his childhood." For BandofInsider this film is more autobiography of the director of *My Winnipeg* than the character within it. In fact, the perspective of director Guy Maddin is better maintained than that of the character within the film. User Reviewers often write in their reviews that the film is heavily autobiographical. oOgiandujaOo writes of *My Winnipeg* that, rather than a memory work by a fictional character, the film "is Guy Maddin's heart nailed to a screen, as fiercely courageous a movie as you will ever see.....a love letter to all he holds dear, ice hockey, Winnipeg, silent cinema, sexuality, proletarian utopias, family memories." Blurring the perspective further away from the fictional character, reviewers write confidently about the "docufantasia" as telling the real story of director Guy Maddin. Polaris_DiB's review title states: "Guy Maddin returns with yet another re-interpretation of his life" and MacAindra explains that "the central thesis of the film is Maddin's memories and the city's as well." Getting straight to the point, PopcorninHell labels the film the "director's most personal work," Kris Knipp says it is "his [Guy Maddin's] most autobiographical," and dbborroughs sums it all up by writing that the film is "essentially an autobiography of Maddin." For these reviewers, the film is not the

story of a fictional character, but they are convinced that the film is a highly personal account of director Guy Maddin's childhood and experiences in the very real Winnipeg. One reviewer, however, is skeptical about whether or not this film is really about director Maddin. According to Hooper450, "Maddin has made faux-biographical" films before..... but with *My Winnipeg*, it feels like he's finally letting us in. Of course, it's just as likely that he is putting us on, and if he is, it's one of the most staggeringly beautiful con games ever committed to celluloid."

In addition to writing about *My Winnipeg* as an autobiography, both films are written about as focusing on historical events rather than fictional films. While reviewers of *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* challenge the credibility of the protagonists whose stories the films privilege, *My Winnipeg* and *Lilies* are written of as historical texts – factual accounts devoid of authors, silencing the playwright and director because they are without a role in the historical play or film they created from memory.

For these reviewers, the events depicted in the films are remembered rather than the process of memory production by the protagonists. *My Winnipeg* is written of as both historical and as a travel tourist film. BandofInsiders writes of the film that it "examines the local history and folklore of Winnipeg." Crossbow0106 concurs about the edifying possibilities of the film, writing "This is an 80 minute documentary about the [Winnipeg] place....taught me about the city." And Gavin6842 laments "I wish I had been there (Winnipeg) to fully understand it." These reviewers remember *My Winnipeg* is an edifying film about a city, not a character on a quest to get away from it.

Other reviewers are not as sold on the historical accuracy of the film, but maintain that it is more history than memory. Popcorninhell writes that it's "hard to ferret out what's real."

This implies that some of it is real, and that the reviewer believes that this is a history film. bob the moo writes with uncertainty about the film as well, stating “The film presents itself as a documentary and indeed there are some facts in there if you look (and with some stories you will go online afterwards to check if they are real or not).” Like Popcorninhell, bob the moo ascribes potential historical accuracy in questioning it. And bob the moo goes further, writing of the film that “it is a fantasy but it is really fun to go with it and believe it while it is being told.” Believing in the potential historical accuracy of the film is further supported by how reviewers write about the film style as having “old-school effects” (Popcorninhell), “silent film pastiche” (zetes) and “look[ing] like a daguerreotype picture postcard of this snowbound wonderland” (cashiersducinemart). The film style Maddin employed in creating *My Winnipeg* looks old, and for reviewers this can make determining what is historical and what is fantasy challenging. death-hilarious writes confidently that “stock archival footage (including private home videos)” are used in the film, and so does druid333-2, who writes that the film is “incorporating some original home movies.” However, bob the moo is more skeptical, stating that “you can never be sure what is stock footage and what is not.” The belief that the footage could be from the period indicates that reviewers consider the film to be potentially historical rather than a fictional memory tale of a director within a documentary.

User Reviews of *Lilies* remember the film as an accurate historical account of the happenings in a small town rather than as memory work by a fictional character. The same historical (as opposed to memory tale) nature of the film is outlined in User Reviews of *Lilies*. However, the Reviewers do not see the whole film as historical, but just the scenes where Simon and Bilodeau appear to travel outside of the prison. timleemail@aol.com writes of the

apparent movement in the film as “cuts between the prison re-enactments and the actual events.” The ‘actual events’ implies that this is not a fiction but a history. Gradyharp echoes this writing of Simon’s play as “a re-enactment of the incident 40 years ago.” User Reviewers write of *Lilies* as a movie depicting the past through re-enactment of actual events – something that really happened rather than the fictional and personal memory construction that Simon has created within the film. By writing of these fiction films as histories, User Reviewers do not acknowledge the autonomy of authorship and perspective that Guy and Simon are given in the films.

Lilies and *My Winnipeg* include the production of a memory work very clearly stated to be written and produced from the point of view of the protagonists, Simon and Guy; *Marion Bridge* and *The Hanging Garden* present memory explorations carefully filmed to be explicitly from the point of view of protagonists Agnes and Sweet William. However, when User Reviewers write of their experiences watching the films, this autonomous point of view is refuted. User Reviewers challenge Agnes’s and Sweet William’s perspectives as they question the credibility of the protagonists and write of the memory of the traumatic events from the perspective of other characters. User Reviewers write of Simon’s and Guy’s carefully curated memory work as being a text without an author, or simply the telling of a historical event devoid of perspective. When viewers write about the films, they do not support the memory exploration or memory work as told by the protagonist, but recall the events depicted as historical, not a character using memory as a means of revenge or escape from the memories of their past. For User Reviewers, Simon did not experience the murder of his lover – Bilodeau did, and so did the whole village. Guy is not working to escape a childhood of being entrapped in an

odd town and with an overbearing mother, but is recalling the history of a city. Sweet William did not experience the violence and extreme homophobia in his own family, or the paternally sanctioned sexual abuse but was part of a struggling family, which he abandoned. And Agnes's sexual abuse by her father was not just her trauma but also her sister's and her mother's, and really just part of an East Coast childhood.

User Reviewers engage with and write about these films and the memories they tell as being interpreted through the lenses of the User Reviewers' own experiences. A textual analysis of both the films and the User Reviews of them show that these are no longer the fictional personal memories of the films' protagonists, but are now also part of the viewers' own memories. Through the writing of their reviews, they share how they have engaged with the films through their own memories of film watching, and memories sparked by the film's content.

Chapter 5

Sparking Significant Memories in the Process of Remembering and Writing about Films

Despite User Reviewers' tendency to question and negotiate the memories told in *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, *Marion Bridge*, and *My Winnipeg*, almost half of the User Reviewers also write about the films as containing significant meanings. These deeper meanings and sometimes universal messages are discerned by User Reviewers in the process of engaging with the film, negotiating the narratives the film tells, interpreting the film through their own sparked personal memories, and finally writing their memories of both in their User Reviews on the IMDb.com.

The term 'spark' as used throughout this chapter and this dissertation is carefully chosen to illustrate the process by which memories appear to jump and alight in the minds of User Reviewers. In writing about the films, User Reviewers discuss fleeting and unpredictable memory thoughts that the films inspire in them. Like a metal sparkler lit in the dark, these thoughts catch fire and grow out from the film in the minds of the User Reviewer briefly lighting up another memory somehow related to the film. The path from sparked thought back to the film they engaged with is often self-reflexively traced by the User Reviewer in their writing as part of the process of remembering the film. These sparks appear random, but for User Reviewers, they light up new ideas about the film and the memories it recalls in them.

As discussed in the last chapter, films are material for interpretation for reviewers. To quote Kuhn again, a User Review is "material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities" (6). Extending Kuhn's point in this case, the interpretation she speaks of is not just at the level of interpreting the film, but is an interpretation that combines

both the film and personal memories that extend beyond and before viewing. Through their reviews, User Reviewers negotiate the films in light of their own sparked personal memories, and ultimately use both to determine and interpret the significant meaning that they believe exists in between the film and their memories of it. This chapter will negotiate and interpret the pattern that emerges when User Reviewers write about their process of negotiating and interpreting personal memories that each of these memory films spark against their memories of the films, and will further consider the resulting assertion by half of the User Reviewers that the films contain significant meanings that are discerned through this remembering practice. This pattern points to a collective practice of remembering that focuses on these films and on this digital memory recording platform, a collective practice that becomes apparent through the analysis of how User Reviewers write of their own engagement with each film.

The process of negotiating and interpreting begins with how User Reviewers relate to the narratives of memory told in the films which depict and privilege the films' protagonists' very personal memories of the past. However, User Reviewers do not focus on that single view of the past. Rather, they remember the events devoid of a single filmic rememberer. At the outset of *Prosthetic Memory*, Alison Landsberg questions how viewers engage with films, writing:

To what extent do modern technologies of mass culture, such as film, with their ability to transport individuals through time and space, function as technologies of memory? In what ways do these technologies of mass culture challenge the distinction between individual and collective memory? How might individuals be affected by memories of events through which they did not live? (1)

Landsberg wonders how viewers relate to filmic memories they did not live through. She determines that viewers could suture themselves onto “a larger history” (2) of which they had no actual experience. The result is a *prosthetic memory* or a “personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live” (2). The User Reviews of *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, *Marion Bridge*, and *My Winnipeg* do not reveal that User Reviewers take on the memories of characters or circumstances in the films. Instead, an analysis of User Reviews shows that they contest the filmic memories and at the same time have their own personal non-film memories sparked through engaging with the films, memories of their own fraught childhoods or priests’ vestments.

José Van Dijck writes of “mediated memory objects’ such as pictures, videos, recorded music, diaries, and so on; people have a vested interest in them because they come to serve as material triggers of personal memories” (“Memory Matters in the Digital Age”, 349). The films explored in this dissertation are mediated memory objects for User Reviewers, who write about the films through their own recalled personal experiences. For instance, watching the priest character in *Lilies* sparks in User Reviewers their own personal memories of priests, which may differ from or align with the filmic priest. Once the memory is sparked, User Reviewers can use their own memories recalled in the present to contest, negotiate, and interpret the film they are writing about. Whether or not these sparked memories are based on lived experience or are prosthetic is unknown — and not relevant, as they are real for the User Reviewer. These sparked memories become comparative material through which to understand and evaluate the film, ultimately distilling through this interpretation the significant meaning the User Reviewers believe the film holds.

Literary semiotician theorist Kalaga writes that “interpretation is a mode of our existence. What sets human existence apart from other modes of being is the continuous interpretation of oneself and of our involvement in what surrounds us” (21) and “we interpret every present moment of the surrounding world as well as ourselves in that world” (23). This interpretation extends to the User Reviewers’ engagement with the film, the time between that engagement and writing, and all past experiences sparked in the process of watching, thinking, and writing. Through this meshing of personal and filmic memories recalled and re–recalled, User Reviewers write of the deeper meaning the film holds which is waiting to be interpreted.

This process of remembering and interpreting is replicated across most of the reviews, pointing to a practice of finding meaning in remembering. Kansteiner writes that

we should conceptualize collective memory as the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors: The intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who ignore or transform such artifacts according to their own interests. (180)

These User Reviewers take up the practice of remembering presented in the films and the representations of memory provided by the filmmakers, then negotiate the stories the films tell by ‘ignoring and transforming’ them in order to uncover the significant meaning they seek.

The personal memories that are sparked through watching these films fall into several categories, including memories of film watching, film style and context–related memories, and personal experiences. The memories of watching the films are usually based on locations and circumstances that come to bear on the Users sparked experience and memory of the film. In

their negotiation and interpretation, User Reviewers compare the films to other texts, including reviews, interviews, other User Reviews, artists and memories of similar or better use of film style. Regarding film style, User Reviewers write about their memories and experiences of Canadian film, often revealing a strong awareness of Canadian film history, policies, and Canadian auteurs. On a more personal note, User Reviewers write of their memories of place, being gay and in a family. All of these sparked personal memories are used to negotiate the User Reviewers' understanding of the films. However, the interpretation of the film through and between personal memories points to significant meanings and universal messages that emerge between sparked personal memory and the film.

The process of interpreting the films through personal memories is, according to some reviewers, inspired by the films themselves in that these memory films position the viewer to move into a state of remembering beyond the film. *kiichi_mirabella15* writes of *My Winnipeg* that "if you grew up in a small town where nothing much happened, as I did, you could relate to the nostalgic elusions to the monuments, people and staples of the town." *Hooper450* writes of watching the same film: "it's downright impossible not to be overcome with feelings of deep nostalgia and wonder." Personal nostalgia, for both of these User Reviewers, is inspired by the films' narratives. These are not just memory works, but texts that acted upon the viewer to move them into their own memories, in this case memories that became User Reviews they have submitted on the IMDb. User Reviewers who write about films that do not focus on memories also create memory works about their own film engagement when they write their reviews. However, the focus of this dissertation is on how User Reviewers of films depicting

memory and remembering as the main subject matter are inspired to write about that subject themselves.

As indicated above, the full list of User Reviews for each film is included in the Appendices following the Works Cited and the User Reviews are included exactly as they appear on the IMDb.com including all typos, misspellings, and errors.

Memories of Film Watching

User Reviewers often begin their memory work by writing about the context in which they say they first viewed or reviewed the film in order to explain the perspective they will go on to share of the film. When writing of *My Winnipeg*, the context statements are used mostly as an example of the high esteem they have for the film. tomrombouts writes “I have seen this three times now.” Harry T. Yung concurs, explaining their memory of “Emerging from the cinema with a feeling of elation akin to what one experiences after attending a superb classical concert, I wanted to explore more of director Maddin's work,” and bob the moo explains that they already had experience with Maddin’s work and remember watching *My Winnipeg* to re-engage with this auteur: “I knew for some time that he [Maddin] had made several films since the last time I watched his work but it took me a while to get around to them. This film was my starting point to catch up a little and it seemed to be a good choice as it mixes humor with tragedy, words with images and truth with complete fiction.”

Memories of the initial engagement with the film are also linked with place. For two User Reviewers of *My Winnipeg*, their memories of watching are tied to film festivals. rschmeec writes “I saw this recently at the 2008 Seattle Film Festival, along with sixty or seventy other films, and the only other one that kept me so continually spellbound was Nina Paley's *Sita Sings*

the Blues.” 67rocks writes of seeing the film “Screened with live director–narration at the Sydney Film Festival, *My Winnipeg* was not always easy to engage with but was, ultimately, one of the most satisfying filmic experiences of the Festival fortnight to–date. The first 20 minutes are the toughest slog – it takes a little while to comprehend exactly the direction this loving–yet–satirical homage to Maddin’s hometown is trying to accomplish.” For rschmeec and 67rocks, the location and context of where they saw the films is a significant factor in the positive memories they write about *My Winnipeg*.

However, memories of watching the films are not always positive, and may be cited in support of a negative User Review of the film. On the one side, dbborroughs writes, “I was ready to bail early on.” While dbborroughs does go on to explain their memories of enjoying the film despite their initial reaction, LovinMoviesMakinGamesthe has nothing good to say and recalls their memories of watching by writing that the “\$7 I paid for watching this on PPV will never come back.” Similarly, one User Reviewer’s memories of watching *Marion Bridge* laid the foundation for a negative User Review. steele–12 writes, “Shortly after the opening scenes I began to think I had made a bad choice. A number of times I was tempted to get up and leave (and I rarely walk out of a movie) but decided there must be something redeeming about it.” Like lovinMoviesMakinGamesthe, steele–12 begins their review with negative memories of watching the film and did not go on to find anything redeeming about it — unlike grant1971, who begins their positive review with their equally positive and fresh memory of watching the film. They write, “I just saw “Marion Bridge” at the Arizona International Film Festival. What a great movie!” Context of film watching provides an opening to these User Reviewers’ memory

writing, framing their memories based on their initial responses, a very personal moment that is only linked to the film through the User Reviewer's experience.

User Reviewers' memories of viewing, and often reviewing, *Lilies* are all positive and used as evidence of the strengths of the film. Aoichou writes, "As I walked away from this film (though only for the time being, as it deserves many more viewings) I felt so much, and yet all I could do was smile." Similarly, Acearms writes, "I've seen it several times" implying that it was such a positive experience it bore repeating. Michael1144000 also writes of rewatching the film after an initially positive viewing experience. They write, "I stumbled upon this amazing movie in a quality gay bookstore and am I ever glad I did. It is now one of my very favorite films.... I've watched the DVD a dozen times now." Leon Fairley writes, "I found this film so beautiful that I was on the edge of my seat all three times I saw it (in one week)." Leon Fairley and Michael1144000 further their contextualizing of the film within their first viewing to tell of rewatching *Lilies* numerous times because the initial viewing was so wonderful. Just as the memory of almost leaving a film appears repeatedly written about in User Reviews of both *My Winnipeg* and *Marion Bridge*, so too are multiple viewings as a personal memory used to validate the worth of *Lilies* by these two reviewers. Initial viewing experiences are both deeply personal and frame the User Reviewers' memories of watching, positive or negative.

User Reviewers also write of watching the *The Hanging Garden* numerous times. causeimreal writes, "I first discovered "the hanging garden" on Sundance, and I felt in love from the first viewing." causeimreal does not indicate how many reviewings they went on to have, but Brigid O Sullivan does: "I recently saw this again having first seen it in the theater on its release and been spellbound by it." Similarly, jotix100 writes of their memories of watching and

re-watching. They write, “We saw the film in its original release. Not having seen it since then, we decided to take another view the other night, as it was a haunting piece of film-making.” Also haunted in their memories of first viewing the film, desperateliving writes of re-watching the film: “I’d seen portions of this film on TV when I was about 12, and it frightened me — I thought it a perversely arousing horror film.” For desperateliving there are layers of viewing memory. Finally, Yngvar Myrvold writes not of their memory of first watching *The Hanging Garden* but of loving the film so much that they screened it for a crowd. They write, “When we showed this at our local film society, it got a great reception, one of the best we ever had for a film.” Yngvar Myrvold extends their memory of their original watching of *The Hanging Garden* to show how their original viewing memories of the film were so positive that they went on to share it with others.

User Reviewers also frequently write about first watching *My Winnipeg* and *Marion Bridge* at film festivals, about watching *Lilies* or *My Winnipeg* on rental video and screening *The Hanging Garden* on television. Place is also deeply impactful for how User Reviewers recall their film-watching experience. troyfan writes, “I just caught this movie on cable and loved it immediately,” and miler-5 explains that “it was broadcast by CBC (with all the potty words).” These statements do not correlate to the User Reviewers’ estimation of the value of the film, but do relate to the comparisons with other texts the User Reviewers go on to explore in relation to their memories of the film and its value and validity.

Sparking Memories of Other Texts

User Reviewers frequently write of how the films spark memories of other texts. In comparing the films they review to other texts, User Reviewers reveal information about their experiences

with other films, music, and literature, even User Reviewers' practice of reading other reviews on the IMDb. In fact, three of the four films are reviewed by User Reviewers who indicate that they have read other reviews on the site and how the estimation of other User Reviewers was wrong. Of *The Hanging Garden*, steele-12 continues their disdain for the film when they write, "Based on reviews that I've read I expected something other than this bitter dose of misanthropy." *Lilies* fares much better. In fact, User Reviewer Kinophil-1 adds their text just to counter another negative User Review. Kinophil-1 writes, "I am writing mainly because the one comment I saw on this site was negative. I just watched the movie and it was gorgeous."

Similarly, Ununiliac writes,

Someone commented that it was confusing . . . I found it a bit confusing, but I understood it all at the end. If I'd been paying a bit less attention, I can see how it would have been bad that way. But I think this movie is worth paying attention to see; the story is told in a very unique way. Or maybe I just haven't seen enough clever movies, making me really like this one.

Disputing the memories of other User Reviews becomes the foundation of how these User Reviewers remember the films, just as many reviewers dispute the memories of the protagonists of each of the films.

Marion Bridge is also reviewed by two User Reviewers who state they had read other reviews. Marc A. Leckstein writes, "This film was absolutely wonderful. The others who have commented here have already given a synopsis, so I won't go into those details. Mark A. Leckstein's assertion that 'capsule reviews' included far too much information is seconded in *The_late_Buddy_Ryan*'s comments, which states, "I'm sorry that I found out a little too much

about the plot beforehand from reading capsule reviews.” The_late_Buddy_Ryan and Mark A. Leckstein do not contest other User Reviews or use this awareness of them to value the film but to shape how they narrate their own memory works. For these User Reviewers, their personal experience with the film is recalled in relation to and framed by their personal experience with other User Reviews.

User Reviewers also call upon their memory of print reviews, professional reviews, and director interviews when negotiating the value of the film they are reviewing, in this case usually to support a positive User Review. Bgilch writes of their memories of print media and film awards in negotiating their review of *The Hanging Garden*:

This film was ranked, and fairly, as the best Canadian film of 1997 by Jay Stone of the Globe & Mail (Canada's national newspaper), and if that makes Americans laugh, then consider that this is a ranking ahead of *Sweet Hereafter*, which only made it to the Best Director Oscar Nomination and Cannes Recognition for Atom Egoyan and was also Roger Ebert's #2 film of the year.

Frank van Dijk also relies on memory of film awards in their User Review of *Marion Bridge*, writing that it “was one of 14 films nominated for the Tiger Awards of the International Film Festival Rotterdam 2003 and I wouldn't be at all surprised to see this film win.”

User Reviewers write far more about print media, professional reviews, and interviews related to *My Winnipeg* than for any of the other films, perhaps because, as outlined in the introduction, there is more material about this film and Guy Maddin than about the other films. In fact, as the discussion of Guy Maddin as a Canadian auteur will demonstrate, User Reviewers of *My Winnipeg* have more knowledge about the director than their colleagues do of any of the

other film directors, and this is also evidenced in the User Reviewers' writing of the knowledge of writing about Guy Maddin and *My Winnipeg*. For instance, of print media related to the film, gavin6942 writes,

The New York Times wrote that the film 'skates along an icy edge between dreams and lucidity, fact and fiction, cinema and psychotherapy.' Ebert wrote, "If you love movies in the very sinews of your imagination, you should experience the work of Guy Maddin." He is so right. The first Maddin I saw was "The Heart of the World" and I was hooked by his eye, making the new look old and the old look new.

Of interviews Maddin gave, oOgiandujaOo includes a series of quotations:

Here are some quotations from interviews Maddin gave for this film just so you know what you will be seeing "Children are sexual beings, just think of your own childhood. In my case, I was far more sexual as a child than I am now. Nothing bothers me more than a movie about the innocence of children! What are they innocent of? They might be innocent of murder, but that's about it! Children haven't learned to repress yet or anything like that. They're just teeming with wonderful luridity, from very early on!"

Similarly, Chris Knipp includes some quotations but does not indicate where they found them.

Chris Knipp writes, "Maddin calls this film, done for the "Documentary Channel," a "docu-fantasia," and that's what it is—sort of....The voice-over is a kind of crotchety incantation;

Maddin has said this could be called 'A Self-Destructive Sulk'.....Amusing, elegant,

inconsequential and it doesn't overstay its limited welcome," a London critic writes. I guess

that's fair." For these reviewers their memories of the film are all within the context of a large

body of material about the director.

Chris Knipp and oOgiandujaOo utilize their knowledge of Guy Maddin and print media in their User Reviews, using these memories as evidence of the film's unique qualities; User Reviewers do the same using other literature that is unrelated to the film, but that shows the User Reviewers' awareness of other texts and helps to bolster their good and not so good reviews of the films. B24 outlines the process of how User Reviewers recall information the films spark when writing of texts that *Lilies* sparked in their memory. B24 writes,

As others have commented freely, the play within a play concept is an old warhorse, subject to staginess and other sundry klinkers. For my part, I was reminded not only of Shakespeare but also (purely coincidental) a movie I remember well from 1971 called *Fortune and Men's Eyes*. I believe it was also filmed in a prison in Quebec. Funny how details such as that network through one's brain.

"Networking through their brains," User Reviewers' memory of other and sometimes multiple literary texts are considered when negotiating and interpreting the film content and style. nycritic references several texts that watching *Lilies* sparked: "It at first looked, to me, to be a little stylized, like some of Marguerite Duras' short novels – 'The Ravishment of Lol Stein,' for example — but once the movie takes off, a thing that happens quite immediately, it draws you in." nycritic goes on to compare the young Bilodeau to the Abigail Williams character in Nicholas Hytner's 1996 film adaptation of the *Crucible* writing, "played by Matthew Ferguson, he makes you literally hate this character: his manic glee in denouncing their love, his "prayers" that Simon see the "error of his ways" are only matched by what I recall being Winona Ryder's ferocious performance in THE CRUCIBLE or Bonita Granville's openly evil character in THESE

THREE.” And Harry–76 packs in the comparisons with “A bit of Genet–inspired writing in a quasi “Marat/Sade”–type setting.”

Comparing the film being reviewed to other films happens twice in the reviews of *Marion Bridge*. scheesma titles their review “If you liked ‘you can count on me’ . . .” indicating a similar film as a guide for fans to measure the film’s potential. Similarly, eplrome08 compares *Marion Bridge* to another film readers might have encountered, but in this case to show that it does not measure up. eplrome08 writes, “furthermore, the revelation of the film’s very dark secret was extremely anti–climactic. It could have been a very interesting twist in the film (it was in CHINATOWN), but here, it’s very ho–hum.” Finally, Chris Knipp writes of their own ho–hum experience with *My Winnipeg* by comparing it to another text. Chris Knipp writes, “there’s no sense of personal revelation at all, any more than in Dylan Thomas’ “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.” For Chris Knipp the film does not measure up to their memories of another text they estimated to be similar. Knipp remembers finding a ‘personal revelation’ in *A Child’s Christmas in Wales* but being left with no such memory of *My Winnipeg* leaving the film lackluster against their memory of the other text.

Rather than just comparing *The Hanging Garden* to another film that told the story better, in their estimation, pogostiks writes that the film was not a great representation of Canadian film, and instead recommends another one they remembered. pogostiks writes, “Ten times better –if you are into Canadian film – is C.R.A.Z.Y . . . a film with real people, real performances, humour and other emotions besides the “dramatic” ones . . . and a much surer director’s hand. It will make up for the ennui and gruesomeness of *The Hanging Garden*.” pogostiks remembers better Canadian film experiences. Watching *The Hanging Garden* sparked

their memory of engaging with *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (Jean–Marc Vallée, 2005) not because the films have anything in common but because it did not measure up to their personal memories of other Canadian films.

In addition to memories of other texts, User Reviewers have memories of other artists sparked in the process of writing their reviews. In the case of *Lilies*, there are many references to Shakespeare. Ckmercuri writes, “This film stands out in my collection as the most beautiful gay love story on film so far. It's lyrical story–telling is accented by its Romeo & Juliet–inspired forbidden love theme, while avoiding any political message that plagues today's current stream of gay love stories.” Similarly, Acearms writes, “The characters are all played by males reminiscent of the days of Shakespeare.” And Richard E. Dodson writes,

I'll catch the conscience of the Bishop (to paraphrase Hamlet). 'Lilies' is a morality play about love, murder, and retribution – three themes that have dominated classical drama for millennia. But, although it borrows heavily from Shakespeare and classical Greek drama, 'Lilies' is in many ways new and experimental also. The manner in which the scenes of the hauntingly beautiful "imaginary" landscape of northern Quebec are interleaved with the somber gray of the "real" prison set in which the play within a play unfolds is nothing short of brilliant. I've never seen anything quite like it in a movie before. The 'play within a play' like Hamlet makes for very interesting viewing as the back story unfolds.

Unlike the other mentions of Shakespeare, Kinophil–1 writes of how the film does not borrow from Shakespeare but instead departs from his style: “The movie is quite obviously set in a prison where there would be a lack of women. It is quite artistic. The use of men to play women

is both campy, and artsy, hearkening back to Shakespeare. It is not done to get laughs however.”

User Reviewers of *My Winnipeg* refer to other artists in their reviews more than all of the other User Reviews combined. Chris Knipp writes simply that “Winnipeg is to Guy Maddin as Baltimore is to John Waters.” David Lynch is referenced in two User Reviews of *My Winnipeg* (popcornihell and Andres Salama), and memories of Freud’s writings and theories are also sparked for two User Reviewers (popcornihell and BandofInsiders). Dbborroughs writes that the film is “part neo–silent films pretentiously melded with an artistic bent with a sense that Dwain Esper suddenly was crossed with Andy Warhol.” Similarly, oOgiandujaOo writes out their list of artists: “The film transcends documentary, even fantastical documentary, into mysticism. Maddin uses the imagery of horses, as have many great artists from Raphael, to Gericault, to Marc, to Parajanov.” MisterWhiplash adds to that list: “Stanley Kubrick Bergman, Fellini De Sica Allen Ginsberg Michael Moore” and druid333–2 writes of Maddin’s supposed influences that:

His influences are (among others)some of the films of silent era Soviet documentary film maker Dziga Vertov (Kino Pravda),and Serge Eisenstein (Ivan The Terrible,Alexander Nevsky),as well as some of the pioneer experimental film makers of the 1950's & 1960's,such as Kenneth Anger (Scorpio Rising),Stan Brakhage (The Way To Shadow Garden)& Jack Smith (Flaming Creatures).

In making sense of *My Winnipeg*, User Reviewers have clearly found their previous film and text experiences sparked.

Two User Reviewers of *Marion Bridge* recall Chekov when discussing their memories of the film (Vanessa Peeters and eplromeo8) and The_late_Buddy_Ryan praises the film with

“comparisons to Mike Leigh’s ‘Secrets and Lies,’ the highest praise IMHO, are certainly warranted.” *Marion Bridge* sparks positive connections for these User reviewers to other perhaps more commonly recognized texts. These User Reviewers use these sparked memories of similar texts to further spark positive connections for review readers. Similarly, Barry–44, the only User Reviewer of *The Hanging Garden* to make a comparison to another artist, praises the film. They write, “The storyline is perfect, and the camera shots would have pleased Alfred Hitchcock.”

Barry–44 writes that the style of *The Hanging Garden* sparks memories of watching Hitchcock films. Without mentioning artists in particular, User Reviewers write of how the film sparked memories of film styles and techniques. Hooper450 writes, “like most of his filmography, harken back to the choppy, rapid–fire pace of German expressionism and the heart–on–sleeve emotion of '40s and '50s melodrama.” Polaris_DiB writes, “There's re–enactments, found footage, animation, digital effects, and back–projection. There's montage editing, snow falling constantly, layered images, and repeated ostensibly failed takes.” Finally, Rectangular_businessman writes, “The surrealist style of this movie works incredibly well, moving between the dreams, the memories and the reality, resulting in something incredibly beautiful and unique.”

Marion Bridge does not spark personal memories of other film styles in User Review writers, but grant1971 does recall their in–depth knowledge of female dramas when watching and remembering the film. grant1971 writes,

This film is labeled as `Genre: Drama, Female'. It's NOT! When I think of female dramas or `chick flicks' I think of the typical "woman making it (or not) in man's world" (Steel

Magnolias, *Thelma and Louise*) or sappy overly emotional Cinderella story (*Never Been Kissed* and about a thousand others I can't think of now). This is not one of those. This is a drama. An excellent drama that, coincidentally, has a primarily female cast.

Marion Bridge is classified as a drama by grant1971 based on their sparked memories of chick flicks. User Reviewers consistently write of their memory of these films in relation to previous experience with other texts and in the process reveal their awareness of these other references. These intertextual memories are connected through personal remembered experience and are material for interpreting the films User Reviewers write about.

Memories of Canadian Film

User Reviewers reveal a great deal of information about their prior knowledge and experience with Canadian film when writing of *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, *Marion Bridge*, and *My Winnipeg*. These sparked Canadian film memories describe a national film industry that film viewers are well aware of. It is an industry of underfunded, under-screened or unmarketable and underappreciated films, but at the same time an industry that creates unique independent films. The User Reviewers who write of these films consistently write of them as Canadian films, with Canadian actors, locations, and directors, a nationalizing treatment that is not part of how American films are written about in the IMDb. In fact, User Reviewers seek out and praise all four of the films discussed here for their unique qualities as Canadian films.

Canadian locations are repeatedly spark memories for User Reviewers. Of *Lilies*, Hanno Wupper mentions that it takes place in a Canadian school and hotel, and Leon Fairley mentions the location of the prison as being in Canada. It is not just place that is identified by nationality. nycritic praises the lead actors in *Lilies* when they write, "Played by the young Canadian actors

Jason Cadieux and Danny Gilmore.” Similarly, druid333–2 writes of *My Winnipeg* that it had “a cast of Canadian actors.” This User Reviewer does not list the actors by name but assumes that they were Canadian.

In addition to location and cast, these films spark memories of Canadian films for their low budget style and aesthetic. Of *My Winnipeg*, kiichi_mirabella writes, “This film probably had no real budget to speak of and if you are really paying attention, you would notice that it's actually mostly old footage of one man's home town.” No research into that budget seems to have been conducted to confirm kiichi_mirabella's assertions, but they are not alone in their assumptions. Of *The Hanging Garden* preppy–3 writes, “It's well–done (on next to no budget) and has some beautiful (if obvious) symbolism using flowers and nature.” The revealed memories of budget restraints for Canadian film are also leaked in writings of User Reviewers expressing surprise that the films are good in spite of being Canadian. Ani (ani_saguine) writes of *Lilies*, “When I first heard my friend tell me that the fourth play my seminar class had been made into a movie, a good movie and a Canadian one at that, I decided that this would be a must–see. All in all, *Lilies* is exceptionally good for a Canadian film.” For Ani, Canadian is synonymous with lesser quality. Similarly surprised by a Canadian film, The_late_Buddy_Ryan title their review of *Marion Bridge* “Pre–'Deadwood' Molly Parker and pre–'Juno' Ellen Page in a first–rate film from Canada.” The_late_Buddy_Ryan goes on to write that “A lot of viewers will head for the exits when they hear words like "subtle," "naturalistic" and "prizewinning Canadian drama," but I know you're better than that.” Viewers will not want to watch a Canadian film, even if, as Mike Salvati writes, “This fantastic, unassuming Canadian film is one

of the best I have seen in a long time” and bgilch writes, “Hanging Garden is a small, intensely felt film. Adulations all around are deserving for this home–grown production.”

Awareness of a lack of screening options for home–grown Canadian productions is also sparked in User Reviewers. Apparently outside of Canada, mooseburton writes of *Lilies*, “It is a Canadian film and that may be why it did not get much exposure here in the US.” Paz agrees with mooseburton, with evidence of their assertion when they write, “This film is proof that some of the most iridescent, incredible films never make it to mainstream America. Barely anyone I know has even heard of this movie, and it's quite saddening. Although it has won numerous awards and lots of prestige in Canada, where it was made, I've often seen it lying on the shelf untouched at Blockbuster or gay film shops.”

Lack of viewership is mentioned twice in relation to *The Hanging Garden*. In Brigid O Sullivan’s estimation, *The Hanging Garden* remains unfairly under–viewed. Although they do not indicate their measure for fairly viewed, they write of the film: “Again, it is one of those under–appreciated Canadian gems that have not been brought to a wider audience. And deserve to be.” mallen8486 gives personal experience of not having accessed many Canadian films. They write, “I have not seen many movies from Canada, and this was really good albeit confusing to me!!” Lack of viewership is also mentioned twice in relation to *The Hanging Garden*. Python Hyena writes, “Intriguing yet confusing Canadian drama about a haunted family history.” And moonspinner55 writes, “Baffling 'dysfunctional family' drama from Canada.” For these User Reviewers, watching these films sparks personal memories about Canadian film and its distribution and viewership based on their own experiences. These personal experiences

reveal that these User Reviewers believe that there are not very many Canadian films and that those that are available are confusing.

Gnostic21 furthers this understanding of Canadian film by giving some additional reasons for a lack of availability. In their User Review of *Marion Bridge*, Gnostic21 writes, I rented the DVD of this movie because indie movies, and 'fringe of empire' movies (Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, sometimes British) are not corrupted by the demands of Hollywood blockbuster profitability. I don't understand why the secrecy, unless it has to do with the movie's potential for international distribution. Also the possible lesbian interest of one of the sisters. They give mystery to the plot that seem to be unnecessary, unless the religious component of the sister's lives is a defining element. Parental incest / lesbianism are NOT rare shocking phenomena.

While Gnostic21 gives reasons the film might not have been marketable based on their understanding of the market, none of these are because the film is Canadian. In fact, they rented it because it was Canadian. For many User Reviewers, the idea of Canadian films sparks positive memories and associations. As timpleemail writes of *Lilies*: "Lilies appeared from Canada as a fresh bouquet presenting a refreshing change of pace." And death-hilarious writes of *My Winnipeg's* humour that it was "held together by the barest narrative thread, the film is most like Berlin: Symphony of a Great City, though being Canadian it's much funnier and self-deprecating." These Users review the films through the lens of their positive memories of Canadian film as quirky, self-deprecating, and different.

User Reviewers also compare the films they review to other filmmakers indicating their knowledge of film and how those memories were sparked. Vanessa Peeters writes that *Marion*

Bridge was a “Canadian–cum–Bergman homage.” Other reviewers of the film praise it as an Independent Canadian film, using the terms as interchangeable. Marc A. Leckstein writes, “As someone who loves the theatre but is tired of seeing the same material recycled again and again, it is refreshing to know that independent film still exists.” Three other reviewers take their praise of *Marion Bridge* as an independent film further, explaining that it sparked memories of independent films, revealing their high praise for the film. grant1971 writes, “It's a strong truthful script without the over the top soapbox agenda so common to independent films.” And The_late_Buddy_Ryan concurs, writing: “Excellent family drama from '02. Starts out like a typically rambling indie film but quickly becomes quite involving and suspenseful.” Finally, MurFilms rounds out the praise with “This was by far one of the best independent films that I have seen in a long time.” Raleon similarly praises *The Hanging Garden* when they write, “the symbolism of his 'death' and the developing of the story really made this movie worthy to be a Canadian classic.” Here the User Reviewers consistently assert that the Canadian film aesthetic is aligned with an independent style of filmmaking, and it is this personal memory that is sparked in watching these Canadian films.

Memories of Auteurs

Based on User Reviews of these four films, the belief in a Canadian filmmaking style persists, particularly in relation to writers and directors who have made several films. Canadian film for these reviewers is not just a style, but in watching and remembering these films, User Reviewers write of their sparked memories of other films written and directed by the same artists, negotiating their understanding of the film they are reviewing through the sparked memories of the filmmaker’s other works. Writing of the films as part of an oeuvre of an

auteur, whether writer or director, is one of the most common themes throughout the User Reviews being examined, second only to the assertion that the films contain a universal significant meaning or message.

By far the most User Review references to a filmmaker as an auteur with a unique style and syllabus of films are for Guy Maddin. While print reviewers focused on Maddin as a queer filmmaker, User Reviewers write of his style and other films with little mention of the director's queer identity. oOgiandujaOo lays it out clearly in their review. They write of *My Winnipeg* that "Maddin has now taken the step from being a beloved cult director, to being a great auteur."

Users write of Maddin the auteur as having a very clear style of filmmaking.

popcorninhell writes of Maddin's style:

Always the neo-constructionist, Maddin employs a sloe of old-school effects and technical wizardry that enhances the experience. It has been said that Maddin's films always have the feeling of seeing pre-code talkies from another, warped dimension. A dimension where people of the thirties would accept fluid sexuality, incest and gore in their films. Granted while *My Winnipeg* sacrifices the gleefully salacious themes of *Careful* (1992) and the grotesqueness of *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988) the film stands as the director's most personal work. The same themes do remain but only on the fringes, subtly weaved into a complex tapestry of nostalgia and surreal flights of fancy.

cashiersducinemart also refers to Maddin as an auteur when they write, "A love poem to Canadian auteur Guy Maddin's soon-to-be-former home, *MY WINNIPEG* feels like a fever dream that brings together past, present, and future. Looking like a daguerreotype picture

postcard of this snowbound wonderland, MY WINNIPEG typifies Maddin's mad genius and captures his sordid relationship with his home." User Reviewers focus on Maddin's other films and his dark and dreamlike nostalgic themes and styles, illustrating their sparked personal memories of his oeuvre rather than discussing Maddin the person.

Of Maddin's unique style and themes, capone666 writes, "Sometimes factual, most often fictional, surrealist filmmaker Guy Maddin forgoes the snowscape stereotype, instead using his abstract black and white style to enhance the city's inexplicable allure." And MacAindra writes that "Maddin's love of the silent film era has shaped his own visual style, shot usually on old grainy film stock, appearing as if his films were perhaps well preserved 1920s avant-garde. He's built a career on making films so outrageously insane by modern film-making standards. His films are usually either bizarre horrors or totally unique comedies, or both." That this style is consistent, no matter how bizarre, was a relief for several User Reviewers. BandofInsiders writes, "An aspect of this film that makes it so interesting is the fact that Maddin's decision to not change his long-time visual style actually works out for him even while working in a new "genre" for him." These User Reviewers do discuss their apparent awareness of the director himself as they reference his love of "the silent film era," although none mention how they have come to this knowledge.

User Reviewers are clearly aware of Maddin's film syllabus and regularly include detailed information about these films in their reviews. In writing of *My Winnipeg*, their memories of watching other Maddin films (and their themes) are routinely sparked. oOgiandujaOo writes, "Influences become clear as never before, Maddin's ambisexuality is on display (1995's Sissy Slap Boy Party now makes sense), "La Roue" (1923/Abel Gance) is revealed

as his cinematic touchstone (following on from the quotation in "Odilon Redon – or The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity", also 1995). "My Winnipeg" is Guy Maddin's heart nailed to the screen, as fiercely courageous a movie as you will ever see." crossbow0106 writes, "I have seen Mr. Madden's "Saddest Music In The World", so I know I was expecting something different." And finally, zetes writes, "as I've said before regarding Maddin, his films play out like dreams. I do think the film lacks the focus of his best work, and is, in fact, my least favorite of his features." Sometimes confusing the director with his characters and themes, these User Reviewers are clearly knowledgeable about Maddin and dedicated to tracking his career as a Canadian auteur.

The Hanging Garden was the first feature film Thom Fitzgerald directed, so to call him an auteur would have been premature when these User Reviews were first posted. However, anonymous did praise Fitzgerald's work by writing "This is an amazing directorial debut, and the abundance of cinematic tricks are a welcome storytelling tool." And George Parker, who wrote their User Review seven years after the film's premiere, writes that "this first outing for writer/director Thom Fitzgerald is, IMHO, better than his more recent film "The Event." George Parker was able to indicate that Fitzgerald went on to make more films even though he doesn't indicate that he went on to develop into an auteur. According to moonspinner55, Fitzgerald would never make an auteur. They write, "Fitzgerald wants to prod the audience in a certain direction, but he doesn't have enough talent as a writer (nor the eye of a perceptive filmmaker) to achieve satisfaction on any level." While these reviewers indicate their awareness of Fitzgerald the filmmaker, they are clear that he is not an auteur yet. None the less, their

awareness of Fitzgerald's films and style (or apparent lack of it) become part of the personal experience they use to interpret *The Hanging Garden*.

Marion Bridge was also Wiebke von Carolsfeld's feature-length directorial debut. However, User Reviewers repeatedly write not about her direction of the film but about Daniel MacIvor's writing of the film. In fact, the only User Reviewer who writes specifically about von Carolsfeld, Marc A. Leckstein, writes, "I simply wanted to add my name to those who have praised Wiebke von Carolsfeld's feature length directorial debut." User Reviewers did write of MacIvor and of the film in relation to his other films and plays. Brigid O Sullivan writes, "All unfolds as it should. I was pleased to see the writer was Daniel MacIvor who also wrote another subtle, gentle movie called "The Five Senses." And Chlotrudis writes, "Daniel MacIvor (THE FIVE SENSES; BEEFCAKE) has written an extraordinary family drama involving three sisters trying to deal with their dying mother and the shared secrets of their past." Even when not praising the film, the focus is on the writer. The_late_Buddy_Ryan writes, "Daniel MacIvor's script for "Wilby Wonderful" was overstuffed and chaotic, but here he gives you just enough information to get on with, so you're eager to sift for clues in the sometimes cryptic dialogue of the three main characters." And eplromeo8 concurs with:

This one is written by the same writer (Daniel MacIvor) as the worst Reel 13 film of all – WILBY WONDERFUL. Fortunately for us, they got a different director for this film (Wiebke von Carolsfeld), but he (or she, I suppose) doesn't seem to help much. On the whole, the direction is overly theatrical and uninspired. Where WILBY WONDERFUL was contrived and had a silly sitcom vibe about it, MARION BRIDGE is bleak, melodramatic, mostly lifeless, painfully slow and very, very dull.

For User Reviewers of *Marion Bridge* there was no previous knowledge of the filmmaker to be sparked and recalled, as she had not yet created a corpus of films to be known. John Greyson, however, was already a filmmaker when *Lilies* was released, and yet he is only mentioned in three User Reviews, each time alongside the film's writer, Michel Marc Bouchard. Like *Marion Bridge*, *Lilies* is an adaptation of a play, and in both cases the play author is also the film writer. For instance, grady harp writes, "LILIES, based on a Canadian play 'Les feluettes' by Michel Marc Bouchard, has been adapted to the screen by Bouchard and placed in the sensitive hands of director John Greyson, an artist who is able to indulge in surrealism with reality and make it work well." When *Lilies* was released, Greyson had already directed four films, and print and professional reviewers were already writing of his films as being about queer themes. However, memories of Greyson as an auteur are not sparked and nor does *Lilies* location, while the place where the films are set does spark memories for User Reviewers of each of the other three films. Film setting, location, and scenery are all sparks that User Reviewers use when negotiating their understanding of three films.

Sparking Memories of Place

My Winnipeg is the most obvious spark for memories of place amongst these four films, as of course it is named for and ostensibly about a major Canadian city. Several User Reviewers have their own personal memories of Winnipeg sparked when remembering and writing.

LovinMoviesMakinGames write out of their own knowledge of the city: "So here I am, a Winnipeg raised, U of W educated California transplant, hoping to watch a funny movie, or even mildly entertaining movie about Winnipeg. I am soooooo.... Disappointed. Winnipeg is an entire city with plenty of things to poke fun at. The Simpsons did a better job of poking fun at

Winnipeg then you.” However, cossbow0106 writes more appreciatively, stating “A tribute, kind of, to the great city of Winnipeg, Manitoba (I'm not being facetious—I've been there).” Other User Reviewers write of their understanding of the city, with no evidence they had actually been there. Death–hilarious writes, “Funny enough to make Winnipeg seem charming.” Or out of their desire to go to Winnipeg, as gavin6942 writes: “With this film, I wish I had been there (Winnipeg) to fully understand it. Maddin added a combination of poetry and “Christmas Story”–style narrative to give us the lowdown on a place that is always sleepy, always winter. (Being from Wisconsin, I can understand . . . at least to a point, as it is still almost 700 miles northwest of here. Those in Fargo probably understand better.)” For these reviewers, *My Winnipeg* sparks memories of place, even if these places are just similar cities to the one featured in the film.

Marion Bridge is named after a song and a community. Awareness of its setting in Nova Scotia is mentioned in two User Reviews. Chlotrudis writes of the beauty of the landscape: “The sweeping Nova Scotia landscape echoes the arc of emotions of this troubled family dredged once more to the surface.” And steele–12 writes of the dreariness of the shoreline and its inhabitants: “It portrays Cape Breton as a gray and ugly landscape whose citizens are intent on achieving early death from lung cancer and emphysema.” For these User Reviewers, personal experience with Nova Scotia’s landscape and inhabitants is sparked when viewing and writing about the films. Both become entwined with how these User Reviewers remember their experience with the narrative the film tells.

For User Reviewers of *The Hanging Garden*, place sparked memories of the Maritimes as well, memories that were either dark and funny or beautiful. desperateliving writes, “there's a

lightness in tone that comes mainly from the profuse swearing of the Maritime newlywed (Kerry Fox).” Apparently Maritime newlyweds are swearers by nature. harry-76 questions this nature, wondering if the place is causing the characters’ choices: they write, “Are folks really like this, or is it just something in the Nova Scotian water?” Based on these reviews, swearing is a memorable part of life in Nova Scotia, just as weather is sparking for User Reviewers of *My Winnipeg*.

Two Reviewers write directly of how *The Hanging Garden* sparked memories of living on the east coast of Canada. Milpool writes, “It’s central character, a man who returns home after years away, seems out of place in such a crude and rugged environment as the East Coast. The rest of his family may seem somewhat rude and unkempt, but keep in mind that people are pretty much this way in the Maritimes at any right.” And bgilch and ladyslipperknots write fondly of the memories of place the film sparked. bgilch writes, “shot through the caustic self-wounding humour of the Maritimes, where I lived for six years. This film is a gorgeous if painful tribute to growing up in a remove that already seems past its age, in an ocean playground whose garden has gone to seed. At the singular, crucial sequence of the film, all the elements of the film – colour, symbolism, lamentation.” ladyslipperknots adds that the film “fuse in breathtaking splendor, and I mean so in the inhaled gasp that graces the east coast 'yes '. It still stuns me in memoriam.” For these User Reviewers, negotiating the film is also about negotiating personal memories of the film's local setting. These memories are not related to the film but become entwined with reviewers’ experience of the films and the memory texts they write.

Not writing about their sparked memories of Winnipeg necessarily, but of the weather the city appears to have in the film, two Reviewers had their personal memories of nature sparked. In negotiating their memory of the film, capone666 writes of their knowledge of bugs. They write, “Incidentally that murky quality to the cityscape is a result of fogging for mosquitoes.” Similarly, tomrombouts writes of cold weather and family loss. They write that “some of the material had an effect on me, in part because I also lost a brother some years ago and grew up in northern Michigan with frequently cold weather.” These memories of place are sparked in the process of engaging with the film and become part of the process of interpreting the film.

Sparking Personal Memories

Often, User Reviewers write of having their memories sparked by small details that cause the recall of personal memories because they either align with personal experiences or they do not ring true in relation to those memories. These personal memories are then used as material to interpret their memories of engaging with the film and support their process of uncovering the film’s significant meanings.

The sparked personal memories go beyond place and location to extremely personal details such as the minutiae of priests’ vestments to visceral experiences of dehumanizing discrimination because of one’s sexual orientation. Several User Reviewers of *Lilies* write of their memories of priests. zagauk writes of their personal memory of priestly confessional attire as only a slight devaluing of the film, but they point it out nonetheless: “Minor niggle – you wear a purple stole to hear confessions, not a white one.” For zagauk this part of the film did not make sense, and they had to negotiate that minor inconsistency with the film. nycritic

writes more passionately about their personal memory of priests and their concerns about whether or not the film accurately addressed the filmic priest.

many "men of the cloth" are little more than perverts usurping as the Voice of God because they can't face their own realities — his own punishment comes off as vague. It's as if the movie didn't know how to exact justice against him. In my world, the Bishop would have been tormented until the skin would have peeled off his body — eye for an eye..... It would be best to let Life take care of this type of person; they always die alone and riddled with their inner cancer.

For nycritic, the film did not align with their memories of priests, and negotiating that gap proved challenging. However, B24's personal experiences led them to write more compassionately towards the clergy in their review. Stating "Many of the priests I know personally have similar stories to tell in private, but public disclosure remains a faint hope." Whether or not this means B24 uses this to indicate that the film is unrealistic or honorable is unclear in their review. Either way, the figure of the priest in *Lilies* sparks a great deal of response. Viewers clearly engage in a deeply personal and emotional way with this character and use their own remembered personal experiences with priests to interpret their own memories of the film, and as a result perhaps uncover the significant meaning the film holds in the process.

The portrayal of gay characters in *Lilies* also sparks memories of deeply personal experiences in viewers who write about this theme. ckmercur titled their review "The most beautiful gay film ever" indicating their memories of other gay films. And Steven writes:

This movie is not about being gay, as are most films whose principal characters are. The characters are not what straight cinema normally portrays us to be either. The story is broader than that, there is a purpose in bringing us into these mens lives. I was reminded of how intense love was, how consuming and selfless youthful love can be. However, those feelings were contrasted with memories of vengefulness of unrequited loves gone by too.

As a film about memory, *Lilies* sparks not just memories of Steven's youth but also the act of remembering itself. Steven writes about the conflicting memories the characters face and how this juxtaposition reminded them of the remembering process and in turn their own experience with their own personal conflicting memories.

Contradicting this, Dcannon clearly does not concur with Steven's personal memories of the portrayal of gay characters. Dcannon cannot reconcile the portrayal of Valier and Simon against his own personal experiences of "serious" gay films and gay cinema in general. Dcannon writes:

I have a high tolerance for "serious" gay films, but this one is unforgivable. The story is preposterous; are we really expected to believe that a bishop could be held captive in a prison confessional and forced to watch a play that re-enacts a crucial event in his boyhood? The decision to have the women's roles played by men is just plain ridiculous. And the way it milks the cliché that love between men must always end in death and betrayal does nothing to advance gay cinema. The two boys, however, are quite pretty. But the actor playing the adult Simon bears no resemblance to the young Simon. As a

boy, Simon has a peachy, creamy complexion; as an adult, he bears the obvious signs of severe acne. This is just one of many implausibilities in this deeply silly film.

Beyond being 'pretty' DCannon cannot reconcile their memories of gay characters or gay Cinema with *Lilies*, and this leaves them unable to accept the narrative the film tells.

Like DCannon, Bijou-2 writes of the film's lack of believability, citing memories of personal experience across a number of areas:

This is the sort of pretentious crap that has killed art-house cinema. The fact that the players speak English makes it more criminal to hear dialogue that appears to have been written in French and then sloppily translated. The actors speak like they are reading bad subtitles and are therefore forced to speak some very idiotic sentences indeed. The young actors are pretty but surprisingly sexless. They come across like twelve year old girls, not mature enough to pretend they have any of these feelings. This is stressed even more by the casting of older men in female roles, at once an insult to women and to gay men.

Based on this review, Bijou-2 has had experience with French-language intricacies, sexless actors, young people lacking in emotion, and cross-gender casting and acting. However, in another part of their review Bijou-2 does imply that they have experience being a gay man. Bijou-2 writes, "Apparently Simone paid for his real sins by ageing really badly, a punishment only a gay man would understand." For Bijou-2 *Lilies* sparked an overwhelming series of personal experiences. These experiences do not align well with Greyson's film, leaving Bijou-2 to interpret the film as "pretentious crap."

Personal memories of gay films are also written of by User Reviewers negotiating and interpreting *The Hanging Garden*. miler-5 writes, "As a gay Canadian, I am embarrassed to confess that I had not heard of "The Hanging Garden." miler-5 clearly feels that given their nationality and identity, they should have known of the film. Preppy-3 writes of their understanding of gay films and cinemagoers' needs when they state, "the gay themes are handled very well and explicitly—that may bother some people." In a matter unrelated to the gay themes in the film, Gordon-11 writes of another issue facing those they appear to know. They write, "A powerful scene is when William challenges his mother as for why she has not left her husband. "How will I pay my bills" she says. It's a sad fact, but it is happening to a lot of people right now." Gordon-11 does not indicate if this is a personal experience of East Coasters or just of humans in general. Either way, their sparked memory of the struggles of poverty becomes part of the sparked memory material Gordon-11 negotiates in interpreting the film.

The Significance of Remembering the Meaning

Each User Reviewer writes of memories that the films spark, and these memories of personal experience become material to negotiate when interpreting the films. The process of negotiating between the viewers' memories of the narrative of the film and the personal experiences it sparks leads nearly half of the User Reviewers to write that the films contain something true, real, or universal. The narrative the film tells, and the sparked personal memories, may not align, yet the belief that something meaningful exists in the films persists in these User Reviewers' interpretations and responses to these films. For User Reviewers, that deeper meaning is distilled through the process of interpretation in retrospect, a process that Maureen Turim explains is familiar to film viewers. Turim writes that "flashbacks in film often

parallel this operation as they present a past, like a dream waiting to be interpreted” (18).

Turim writes that Flashbacks signal that the material is to be interpreted, and viewers seem to align with that positioning by interpreting the material in the films for themselves.

That the act of remembering again will reveal a deeper meaning to be interpreted is a contention that exists beyond film. Historian Pierre Nora writes that “What is new, and what it owes to the abysmal sufferings of the last century, to the increase in life expectancy and to the continuing presence of survivors, is the demand for a truth more “truthful” than that of history, the truth of personal experience and individual memory” (5). It was that individual truth that Holocaust and trauma scholar Cathy Caruth sought when she writes “how can we listen to trauma beyond its pathology for the truth that it tells us, and how we might perhaps find a way of learning to express this truth beyond the painful repetitions of traumatic suffering” (viii). For User Reviewers, writing about their experiences of engaging with these four films is an opportunity to discern some deeper and personal meaning through the process of retelling — through re–negotiating and re–interpreting until it is made sense of. David Pike writes of Maddin’s film that “The motion picture promised a new combination of fidelity of its subject matter and access to the truth that was able to bypass the bankrupt aesthetic and political ideologies of realism” (105). There is a significance in the act of remembering that moves beyond how the story was told.

There is, according to the User Reviewers of *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, *Marion Bridge*, and *My Winnipeg*, a significant meaning to be found in these films. This significant meaning is revealed when the film and the memories it sparks are negotiated to allow the User Reviewer

to interpret both. As memories begin to fire off in directions in the User Reviewers mind they utilize them when reflecting on the films seeing them through these memories.

More than half the User Reviewers of *Lilies* mention a universal significance in the film, some even calling it a truth. One of the significances reviewers of the film repeatedly explore in their writing is the need for justice for those who have been persecuted. The 41 User Reviews of *Lilies* contain very few and vague mentions of Bilodeau's crime against Vallier and Simon. However, the reviewers still point to the idea that the film addresses issues of justice in matters of love and murder. Dreamer81465 writes, "The performances are powerful and the message is even more powerful. The message of this film is that justice is eternal and that a man may even meet justice at the end of his life." There is, however, no mention of justice for what or for whom. Marc (westerner) concurs with Dream 81465 in the title of their User Review as "An excellent, disturbing film, about love, revenge, and justice." Michael1144000 writes about the inability of revenge to make up for what is lost, stating "but it is a movie that will make you think about the nature of love, the importance of following one's own truth, the bitter poison of jealousy, and the aching inability of revenge to make up for loss endured. The terrible bitterness of homophobia is shown in a way that makes one realize how great a crime it is to hate love." For these reviewers, their interpretation of their memory of film watching applies to others too, even if it was only distilled through their own personal memories.

Michael1144000 writes about a significant meaning to be found in human emotions, and so do several other User Reviewers of *Lilies*. SamLowry2 writes, "And in the final analysis, the best and worst of human emotion (especially concealed jealousy) becomes so vividly portrayed that one is not sure whether to laugh, cry, or yell out with anger at the characters'

actions.” Roedy Green concurs. They write of the honesty of human emotion: “It is an honest film. It is about the intense emotional attachments of young gay men, something usually denied in depictions of gays. It is a film about being foolish, obeying what you are told rather than what your heart commands you to do.” These writers do not share details of characters or scenes they speak about, but use generalizing pronouns to open their personal, deeper meanings to universal, anonymous populations.

When writing of the deeper meaning in the films, User Reviewers often point to universal significance that reaches beyond the films but is echoed in the writers’ memory of the film. Ronan Carford explains:

There is much more meaning here than just the plight of one man. The movie tells the story of many men and women around the world who are persecuted, imprisoned, and often sacrifice their lives for being true to their love of the same sex. It is good to see a movie that does not portray a same sex relationship as one of casual sex or one-night through the good and the bad together. Heterosexuals do not have the corner on good relationships. This movie tries to portray the love between two people and the struggles they faced, largely due to the intolerance and rigidity of the church.

Ronan Carford writes of the film as representing a significant world-wide experience, but they do so through their own memories. Ronan Carford writes of their experience with other gay films and of gay relationships beyond their experience of those often portrayed in films. Despite their contention that *Lilies* has a universal significant meaning, Ronan Carford writes only through their own highly personal experiences and memories of film watching but ties it to more global meaningful experiences.

Or as nycritic explains: “But, as it goes with people in love (regardless the gender, I will always state that), there is always a monkey wrench.” For nycritic it's no longer a film about Simon's and Vallier's tragic love affair, but about lovers anywhere, anytime, and always. Bruce echoes this, writing “The story is a heartbreaking tale of love, jealousy, and ultimately, of Judgement Day, of the Day of Reckoning. That its storyline is about gay love should not put off heterosexual film goers, because the theme is timeless and universal.” Perhaps it is this timeless and universal remembering of the film that allows reviewers to employ their memory. Just as Tesse writes, “Everyone does things they would rather forget.” In this instance, Tesse's memories are not only being sparked by the film's narrative, but the act of remembering itself seems to be sparked by the film's structure as a memory film.

The push for the family to forget has prevailed in *The Hanging Garden*, but User Reviewers write of the universal beliefs that secrets will out, especially for a dysfunctional family such as Sweet William's. harry-76 writes of the film that it is “a full portrait of the ultimate dysfunctional family.” Within that dysfunctional family, Yngvar Myrvold writes that “the members were “people growing together in your typical family garden of mismatched souls. Every time I watch this small masterpiece, new layers of meaning turn up. The plot structure gives away some undiscovered truths, together with dialogue pointers I didn't notice before. *The Hanging Garden* is short, bittersweet and — sadly — true to life.” Again as in Tesse's experience with *Lilies*, the film's structure as a memory film sparks the act of remembering and uncovering new layers of meaning between the past and the latest present tense in which Yngvar Myrvold remembers and writes.

The 'undiscovered truth' or deeper meaning that turned up for jotix100 through the process of remembering and writing about the film was that "the message of the film seems to be how a family secret becomes the breaking point and its demise." This demise comes when, according to Brigid O Sullivan, the secret's out. They write that "the message of the film revolves around the theme of family secrets and how attempts to bury or ignore them serve only as a temporary cover-up. They will out." For these reviewers the 'messages' of the film are the significant meaning they are seeking to uncover through the act of remembering and writing about their memory of watching the film.

Two other reviewers of *The Hanging Garden* write of a significant meaning in the film that they interpreted and of how to best view the film in order to negotiate and interpret that meaning. causeimreal writes of their preference to view the film alone, stating: "It deals with real issues in a very simplistic way. I would recommend it to anyone, but i will say this: I find it to be one that you watch alone so you can get your own thoughts and ideas about it." And Barry-44 writes of the need to rewatch in order to distill the significant meaning of the film. They write, "I have watched this movie several times — each time seeing much more." Neither causimreal nor Barry-44 says what that significant meaning is. Nor do Chapin-2 A and Mike Salvati, who write of watching the film repeatedly and praise the film for being real. Chapin-2 writes, "lovely, intelligent film that challenges the viewer's assumptions about reality, while celebrating the power of memory and redemption. I have rarely been so moved by the beauty of a film, visually and verbally. The performances are real, the writing superb." Chapin - 2 writes of being moved by the memory that *The Hanging Garden* told, so moved that they went on to write about their memory of being moved by the film's memory. And Mike Salvati

writes, “The story is wonderfully realized, the performances are great, and everything feels very real.” Whether it is “seeing more,” “being real,” or moving, each reviewer asserts the idea there is a significance to be distilled through watching.

Like *The Hanging Garden*, *Marion Bridge* is a film about a character remembering their childhood within a dysfunctional family, and User Reviewers also write about how convincing that dysfunctional family appears on screen, and how their secrets are bound to surface as they reconnect. Brigid O Sullivan writes, “The relationship between the sisters feels real. More than anything it is a story about coming home and making peace with the devils you have tried to leave there but are haunting you everywhere anyway.” Brigid O Sullivan uses the universal “you” rather than the characters' names illustrating their belief that the film has a universal significance rather than a specific one about the actual characters in the film. Chlotrudis similarly writes of any family: “Yet as in any family drama, those secrets preferred left undiscussed rear their ugly head.” Finally, scheesma writes that “the film's tone, pacing and subtle performances allow *Marion Bridge* to draw its strength from the real drama and humour found in everyday choices, characters and settings; as compromised and complex as life lived.”

Many User Reviewers interpret a significance in the films through their memories of how the film is created. Of the adaptation Marc A. Leckstein writes that “Ms. Carolsfeld has taken a powerful story written by Daniel Maclvor and transferred it to film in a fashion that will touch you on many levels.” Two other User Reviewers, pogueelvis and Gordon–11, write of the film’s slow development. pogueelvis writes, “the movie speaks volumes in its silences and expressions” and Gordon–1 asserts that *Marion Bridge* is “a film to ponder on.” Pondering is perhaps a foregone conclusion, as that is what all of the User Reviewers do when they engage

with the film. User Reviewers find their personal memories sparked in order to negotiate the film, and then they interpret both in their User Review.

User reviews of *My Winnipeg* do not ponder long on the significance of the often-absurd facts Maddin tells of the city's history. In fact, while these User Reviewers write of their awareness of the historical facts being inaccurate, they write of them as being part of the personal memories of the director and of the significant meaning in their magic regardless of reality.

oOgiandujaOo writes that "Wittgenstein once observed, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent". It should follow on from this wearied maxim that all true art is destined to be personal. Such a truth is evident when watching Guy Maddin's "My Winnipeg." For oOgiandujaOo, because the film is personal to Maddin it must be true. Hooper450l agrees with oOgiandujaOo, but uses personal memories of Maddin's other films. They write that Maddin "has made faux-biographical films before, 2006's *Brand Upon the Brain* the most notorious example, but with *My Winnipeg*, it feels like he's finally letting us in. Of course, it's just as likely that he's putting us on, and if he is, it's one of the most staggeringly beautiful con games ever committed to celluloid". Other User Reviewers question the historical accuracy of the film as well. MacAindra writes:

So, the question that many ask then, "is it true?" Being Canadian, I know some things are true, some things are not. Would you want to really know the answer anyway? Its law that everyone gets to keep the keys to their old homes. Why? Because the town has the highest sleepwalking rate in the world! They leave their homes and wander to their old houses in the dark, in the cold, in the snow! You must let them in until they wake! Is

that true? I don't care to know. If I knew then I would have to have come back to reality. Unless of course Maddin's Winnipeg is reality. In which case, Winnipeg! Wonderful Winnipeg!

MacAindra does not care to know if the facts are related to truth; instead they write that the film must be significant not because of historical facts but because it is told in a magical way. popcornhell writes of a similar experience with the film. They write:

Those seeing My Winnipeg for the first time may catch themselves wondering if the myriad of tall tales are true. So many claims skate the edge between amusing peculiarity and improbable absurdity that it's hard to ferret out what's real and what's a product of docu-fantasia. While I can sympathize, asking such questions is comparable to asking how many angels you can fit on a match head. It's better to let the film wash over you and be regaled by stories of frozen horse heads, treasure hunts, aboriginal origin stories and other "facts" about the heart of the heart of the continent. That and be taken in by the crisp black and white cinematography that only adds to the city's macabre charm.

Andres Salama adds that "The movie includes a lot of lore about Winnipeg that may be true in some cases and is almost certainly not true in other cases." However, they go on to state that "nostalgia of our childhood is something that most people can relate to." The film's supposed documentary facts may be beyond belief, but they are beautiful in their nostalgia, and User Reviewers find them significant enough to spark their own nostalgia.

bob the moo does not refer to nostalgia for childhood as being the most identifiable aspect of the film. However, they go into detail about Maddin's voice as narrator as the spark for User Reviewer's belief in the film's significant meanings. bob the moo writes that:

Maddin narrates the film and sounds a little like the calm presence that Michael Moore used to be in his film; his presence is welcome because it reminds us that under everything is that core of truth, whether it be in the family recollections or the actual history of the town. The lines are blurred constantly though but this is part of the film's appeal – it is a fantasy and it is really fun to go with it and believe it while it is being told.....it is almost cruel to find they are mostly only true in the smallest detail.

Put more simply, ryancarroll88 writes, “The best way to understand is to watch it, accept it as truth like Maddin has, and experience the world as it becomes a much more magical place.” For ryancarroll88, the significance is that it is magical, but not necessarily accurate. For User Reviewers of *My Winnipeg* the significant meaning lies in universal beauty and the magic of nostalgia.

The deeper significant meanings that User Reviewers interpret through the memory tales told in *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, *Marion Bridge*, and *My Winnipegs* and their own personal memories are rarely detailed explicitly. Instead they only point to the existence of a meaning or universal reality – a significance that can be determined by remembering, and one that is open to all viewers if they ponder their personal sparked memories alongside the film for themselves, the same process that each User Reviewer participates in when writing and uploading to the IMDb. Each User Reviewer’s memories are highly individual and unique, but their process follows a replicating pattern and a collective practice. Van Dijck writes that “Memory filtered through the prism of culture acknowledges the idea that individual expression gets articulated as part of as much as in spite of larger collectives; individuality can be traced in every negotiation of collectivity – past and present – as it is always a response to all

previous representations” (*Mediated Memories: Personal Cultural Memory* 270). These are individual memories sparked by the films and, as a result, individual significant meaning formed in a collective practice of remembering films.

Conclusion: Sparking Memories and Conversations About Movies

When Sweet William drives, convertible top down, into the sunset with his daughter; when the camera zooms out from Agnes on the beach, with her complex and growing family; when Simon leaves the chapel, confession achieved; and when Guy doesn't leave "wonderful Winnipeg"; their stories end. When the credits roll, Sweet William's, Agnes's, Simon's, and Guy's cinematic memory tellings are static, but the memories they told inspire exponentially more memories about those memories constructed for the screen. The memories continue in the discussions that the films started and in the viewer memories they sparked. Memories grow in perspective and quantity every time they are regenerated, re-interpreted, reposted, and each time with new traces about what really matters in the present tense of remembering.

This dissertation has considered how four Canadian films: *The Hanging Garden*, *Lilies*, *Marion Bridge*, and *My Winnipeg*, and the User Reviews of them found on the IMDb, discuss and spark memories. Inspired by Joke Hermes's profound writing about the need for a new kind of audience research that accounts for online media content, this dissertation sought to listen closely, take all the data seriously, and distill from the media what makes life worthwhile and meaningful (83). Through a close textual analysis of these four films and the hundreds of User Reviews, this dissertation explored how memory was presented on film and how it was discussed by viewers as highly contested, sparking personal memories, and became material for seeking out an elusive significant meaning by both characters and viewers. This process of careful study of User Reviews confirms that there is a wealth of information about viewer understandings and practices available through User-Contributed Content. As Garde-Hansen writes in *Media and Memory*, "It is our need to remember and share everything and the

limitations of doing this mentally as individuals that drives human beings to extend our capacity for remembering through media forms and practices” (7). In analyzing User Reviews as texts for understanding of memory, film viewers’ voices enter into the conversation about memory, and what makes memory meaningful and significant. User Reviewers have a great deal to say.

Based on the over one hundred User voices included in this research, User Reviewers are aware of Canadian film and the struggle and success this industry has faced. User Reviewers write of these films as being independent, having small budgets, and regrettably smaller distribution. They write of their awareness of the east coast landscape and of cold Winnipeg weather. They write about their experiences with Guy Maddin’s style and his fantastical body of work, and of their concern that Thom Fitzgerald’s best film was, so far, his first. From wherever in the world they write, User Reviewers share information about Canadian cinema that makes it clear that there are viewers for this national cinema and that these viewers are engaged with the films as Canadian productions. Yet as much as User Reviews show knowledge of Canadian film policies and production, they also contest the traditional framing of Canadian film. Users see these films not as low budget, low quality productions, but as insightful art and independent films that are ‘gems,’ accessible and of interest within and beyond the Canadian border.

User Reviewers also consistently engage with the memory narratives the films tell by challenging and contesting them. In their writing User Reviewers question the reliability of the character’s memories by illustrating holes in their stories based on the viewers’ own personal experiences. Whether it is priests wearing the wrong vestments, or a character’s memory being altered by alcohol, or simply that an older sister’s memory of the event is more relatable, User

Reviewers use their own – ironically perhaps also unreliable – memories to fact-check the memory tales being related onscreen.

The personal memories that User Reviewers rely on to make judgments about the films are sparked by the memory works and memory explorations the films tell. Whether it is remembering being a young gay man, the dynamics of a large family, or that the film had similarities to a Chekov play, User Reviewers' personal memories are used to interpret the films when writing their reviews. It is through the frame of personal memories sparked in the process of watching and remembering the films that User Reviewers write of a significant meaning that can be found in the films. Without even naming it, User Reviewers contend that there is a 'truth' or a 'universal meaning' to be found through exploring how the film aligns with the writers' own personal memories. This significant meaning lies somewhere between the film and the viewer's memories of it and all it recalls in them.

This process of watching the film and remembering it through and alongside the personal memories it sparked is consistent through all of the reviews, and forms a collective practice of remembering, a practice that could only be revealed through the process of considering User-generated content as rich material for analysis and conducting that analysis with detail and without bias or judgement, just as Hermes suggested.

A DVD sitting on a shelf or an image linked to streaming film is just a box or just a series of complicated code. Both tell a story – even the same story duplicated – but the story doesn't really come alive until a viewer engages with it. The filmmakers and their production teams can pour their skill and artistry into their work, but until the viewer sits down to watch it, the story remains unheard and unseen. The viewer has a vital role to play in how films are understood;

they are the other half of the conversation that the film started. In order to understand a film, the audience is key. Traditionally audiences have been studied as a group in artificial circumstances through surveys and interviews with questions that focus on the themes the researcher is looking for. Annette Kuhn's study of film-watching memory "What to Do with Cinema Memory? Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies" discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation is an example of this kind of audience research. While Kuhn's audience study revealed useful findings about how a group of viewers remember films and film watching, the data gathering process remains a limited form of research that requires collective viewing, a form of film engagement that has become less popular amid the current tendency towards private streaming. The audience might have scattered, but the viewers have not. The rise of digital engagement with film has also come with the growing trend for viewer commentary on film through online sites. In fact, researching the viewer has become easier now that they voluntarily contribute their thoughts on publicly accessible sites for anyone to read and consider.

User Reviews, as small nuggets of filmic engagement data, are well worth considering. While film scholars, with their intensive education, deep thinking skills, and thorough film watching experience, have traditionally held the position of being able to accurately explain the film style, historical context, and narrative content in their writings, they are not the only viewers who engage with films, and theirs is not the only perspective that matters. User Reviewers are also viewers who engage with films. They come from an endless myriad of backgrounds and experiences and yet they also engage with the films and write about them. What User Reviewers write about the films they engage with matters. When User Reviewers

produce their text and publish it on the IMDb, they enter into the conversation with the film and with other reviewers of the film. This conversation leaks information about what the writers think about the films they have engaged with as well as their wider beliefs and what matters to them.

In analyzing the 117 User-produced texts about these four Canadian films in conjunction with a traditionally trained film scholar's analysis of the films, this dissertation opens up a new and valuable method of viewer research that moves audience research into the digital age. This research method provides an opportunity to hear the voice of the viewer through their writing and to explore, in this case, how filmic memory narratives are interpreted through personal memories and the viewers' thoughts about both.

These User Reviewers were not just engaging with the films, but with the idea of memory itself, a discussion sparked by the film that illuminates their understandings of how they interpret the film's memory narratives and their own memories and ultimately what memory means to them. For User Reviewers, memory is unreliable and yet memory is the only tool available for Users to show their own equally unreliable memories. Just as memory is unreliable it is also possible to have many memory perspectives that can change over time and through re-remembering. Finally, just as the memories that are sparked into the light for consideration, the process itself has the potential to illuminate significant beliefs and even reveal truths. Memory studies has become a vibrant topic of discussion and study in the last few decades, but the User Reviewers of these films show that it might more aptly be termed 'Memories Studies' because there is never just one memory of any given moment in the past, real or imaginary. Instead, there are an infinite number of possibilities of how thoughts about

the past will spark new thinking, new perspectives, and new understandings about the past and remembering.

The method introduced in this dissertation, to explore the conversation about memory between the viewer and the text they write about, demonstrates the value and possibilities in mining User Reviewer content for further understandings of viewer practices and beliefs. This dissertation only touched the very edge of the research possibilities. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 1, other Canadian films engage in narratives about memory but follow different patterns. What would a textual analysis of those films and a thematic analysis of the reviews about them reveal about how viewers engage with those film memories? What about memories of very real events such as those depicted in Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*? There is certainly a substantive quantity of User Reviews of the film to more than saturate the research data needs.

This new form of viewer research was successful in distilling how User Reviewers engaged with the films explored in this dissertation, but it also has further applications. The films in this dissertation are fictional. However, User Reviewers write about the fictional narratives filtered through their often very real experiences. For User Reviewers, engaging with the film is a very real experience despite its fictional starting point. User Reviewers' texts are not fictions; they recount real personal experiences.

User Reviewers are not the only Users who contribute to conversations about memory. Users contribute and respond to memories of real events on platforms well beyond the IMDb.com. When beginning my research for this dissertation, I came across a very real news story about a traumatic childhood experience. The CBC article "Police dig up barn where Glenna

Mae Breckenridge says her dad buried bodies in 1955” and follow-up piece “No bodies found under barn where Glenna Mae Breckenridge says her dad buried boys” shared the story of Ms. Breckenridge’s decades-long attempt to expose the killing of three first nations boys in 1955 by her father. Ms. Breckenridge recalled witnessing the murders as a young child and explained that the horror of that experience and her own physical and sexual abuse by her father had left her memories of the events buried. The articles explain that Ms. Breckenridge’s therapist and police felt there was sufficient evidence to question her father in the 1990s and then to dig up the barn in 2014, although, as the subsequent article explains, no bodies were found. This story of traumatic childhood memory struck me as similar – although unfortunately not fictional – to the stories told in the four films discussed in this dissertation. And it was not just the memory events that echoed the films’ stories. In fact, the User Comments under each article also shared similar tropes to the User Reviews of the four films in terms of the understanding of how memories can have multiple and multiplying perspectives and tellings.

Like the IMDb, the CBC uses an end-user licensing agreement for its sites, where news readers and viewers can sign on, agree to a few rules, and then share their thoughts under news stories and comment on the thoughts of others. Readers of these two articles had much to say, and like the User Reviews studied for this dissertation, much of it challenged or contested the CBC’s telling of events, by using readers’ own sparked personal experiences. For instance, Rexall uses their apparent knowledge of police inaction to frame their interpretation of the news story when they write, “Whether or not bodies are found, let’s hope police would be more proactive (more trusting of public reporting crime) than defensive (i.e. finding excuses for not acting) in the future. God knows how many more cases like this one were ignored by our

police.” And when no bodies were uncovered, commenters such as Thorstein Veblen use their experience with police corruption to argue just the opposite of Mr. Friendly. Thorstein Veblen writes:

With bogus journalism, the C.B.C. forced the police into action . . . particularly manipulative was the First Nation's involvement. I support First Nations; but, this involvement was pure political pandering, and brings discredit to legitimate demands. Now, the police feel pressured to investigate and commit to the most 'thinly' documented evidence.

Similar to the questioning and challenging of the protagonists' memories in the four films studied here, readers also challenge Ms. Breckenridge's telling of events through their personal experiences of false memory syndrome. Users writing about this article question Ms. Breckenridge's memory and her therapist's culpability in its creation. Ashleyzacharias writes:

'...blocked out the memory of the attacks for years.' Some repressed memories are recovered with the aid of a therapist. Such memories are vivid and detailed. People who have recovered memories of horrific assaults believe them sincerely. Those people are not insane, but are rational and coherent. The problem is that their "recovered memories" are false. They were created from the therapist's suggestions during the therapeutic sessions and are not memories of real events.

Ashelyzacharias's comments are echoed through many more user submissions under the CBC story, and many go on to be furious that the Police spent money and resources investigating when the therapist was clearly at fault for wasting taxpayer money and causing harm to Ms. Breckenridge.

Each of these two articles has hundreds of comments, and many of the comments have several further responses to them, a veritable minefield for exploring thoughts on memory, not to mention beliefs about police services, therapists, and First Nations peoples. To complete a thorough analysis of these User comments and responses with a careful reading and without bias or judgement in order to distill what is meaningful is beyond the scope of this current conclusion; however, there is clearly a great deal of material here for exploring a very real and evolving story of traumatic memory and how it is engaged with by readers and viewers on the far side of a screen.

Comment sections, with similar User agreements and engagement, exist across media platforms. The process of textual analysis of primary works and User content has applications for non-fiction that reach far beyond the IMDb and include conversations between users and over time and space. Hoskins writes, “the traces of people’s lives are increasingly found in their digital communications” (“The Mediatization of Memory” 102). These traces are worth following because they are traces that tell a great deal about who we are. Traces are being left behind across all interactive media, and these User comments can be mined for a further understanding of what is meaningful and makes life worthwhile. As Motti Neiger writes, “The formation and contestation of memories....has become apparently more public in an environment of instant and extensive connectivity where the production, reproduction, repetition and circulation of the media-matter of memory are made available with increasing speed” (28). All of this persistently generated User-contributed commentary data is valuable and important data just waiting for analysis to help us all understand what matters and what is meaningful.

In the end, this dissertation is a very small attempt to include User-generated content in the larger conversation about what is meaningful in memory, a conversation that has a great deal of room for many more voices. Memories don't end, and Users do not seem to be done writing about their memories of these films, and just about everything else they find meaningful.

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Appendix A

The Hanging Garden User Reviews from the IMDb.com

29 User Reviews in Total

1. Confusing and Compelling.



Author: [Python Hyena](#) from Canada

15 September 2015

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

The Hanging Garden (1997): Dir: Thom Fitzgerald / Cast: Chris Leavins, Kerry Fox, Sarah Polley, Peter McNeill, Joel Keller: Intriguing yet confusing Canadian drama about a haunted family history. The garden itself is the one thing its owner cherished while mistreating his overweight son who hung himself there. The confusing aspect is that the body still hangs there yet the victim appears at his sister's wedding now thin and apparently also gay. The body is suppose to be an illusion yet everyone can see it, so it is left unsolved. His sister is marrying his former boyfriend and in a drunken state preparing. It is a film about affliction with sexual content pushed too far and an ending left unresolved. Director Thom Fitzgerald handles the timeline effectively and is backed with beautiful photography. The screenplay is inventive yet somewhat muddled but it holds together thanks to effective casting. Great performances by Chris Leavins, Kerry Fox, Sarah Polley, and Peter McNeill playing characters in and out within this broken family that somehow fail to find common ground to heal the wounds. It regards a father whose love is reserved for the artificial while his son will carry on with the emotional wounds. The rest of the family are just as messed up in priorities and sense of love. Well made film where the garden becomes a graveyard to family tragedy. Score: 8 / 10

2. Holds up well



Author: [Brigid O Sullivan \(wisewebwoman\)](#) from Toronto, Canada

12 March 2009

I recently saw this again having first seen it in the theater on its release and been spellbound by it.

Thom Fitzgerald is both the writer and director of an exploration into a family's dysfunction and disintegration amid their getting together for the wedding of the daughter.

The film shows the family in both the present and the past and centres around the newly returned son, Sweet William, the father, Whiskey Mac and his wife, Iris, and their relationship

to their three children. The father is a nursery man/gardener and the segments of the movie are titled with the names of flowers. As are the children of the family.

In the past, Sweet William, an unhappy overweight boy is conflicted by his latent homosexuality. He develops a relationship with his friend Fletcher. When they are caught making love, the family completely falls apart.

The message of the film revolves around the theme of family secrets and how attempts to bury or ignore them serves only as a temporary cover-up. They will out.

Peter MacNeill, Kerry Fox, Chris Leavins, Troy Veinotte, Seana McKenna and Sarah Polley give able, believable performances.

Again, it is one of those under-appreciated Canadian gems that have not been brought to a wider audience. And deserve to be.

And it has one of the most surprising, uplifting endings!

3. Canadian drama very popular in its homeland . . .less so around the globe



Author: [moonspinner55](#) from las vegas, nv
2 February 2009

Baffling 'dysfunctional family' drama from Canada darts around in time yet fails to give us much to go on. Newly-skinny young man returns to his parents' home after a ten-year absence to attend his sister's wedding (to a man he has always harbored a crush on); relationships in the household are sketchy, however, as the man remembers his childhood as an overweight kid who once attempted suicide (and was apparently rescued). Thom Fitzgerald wrote and directed the picture with a thudding hand (and a barbed tongue, which I'm not sure is supposed to be funny). His touches of surreality are interesting, and there's always a promise here of the scenario becoming much more provocative, but too many questions are left unanswered. As for the "hanging garden" of the title: it's a cheat, with limbs kicking and flowers dying in stop-motion. Fitzgerald wants to prod the audience in a certain direction, but he doesn't have enough talent as a writer (nor the eye of a perceptive filmmaker) to achieve satisfaction on any level. *1/2 from ****

4. Overdone, overblown pastiche of dysfunctional family life



Author: [pogostiks](#) from France
31 October 2008

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

I think what I disliked the most about this film was simply the fact that I didn't like ANYBODY in it . . .not really. The father is a bully and a drunk. The mother is ineffectual, and doesn't even stand up for her children when they are being badly treated or even hit by her husband. she spends her time pursing her lips or waving her arms in frustration. The sister is vulgar as hell and is so completely dislikable in her opening wedding preparations scenes that it is difficult to warm to her later, although she ALMOST managed to break through my reserve for her in a few later scenes, mainly when she is being loving and protective of her older brother. The grandmother seems to be played on two notes only – sweetly senile or bossily mean, convulsed with religious intolerance. The youngest sister/daughter is just a rude, uncontrollable brat. And "Sweet William" is . . .well, so sweet that he seems to more or less forgive everyone and never get really mad at any of what is going on around him. The only person in the entire film that I could sort of warm to was Fletcher – who is luckily not a part of this family and actually seems human and decent, if a bit selfish.

Now, I have seen dysfunctional families before, on and off screen – but here there is no indication that anyone is capable of simply being "normal" for even two minutes. Except for William, every one of them is murderously mean, nasty, muck-mouthed, intense and twitchy in all situations. ALL THE TIME! In the end, they come across as cardboard cut-outs rather than real people, every one of them (except William and Fletcher) overacting like crazy.

There were a few moments in the film that were touching and/or calm, but they were few and far between. In real life I would try and get away from these people as fast as I could. In other words, watching this film is an exercise in masochism. Thanks, but no thanks.

Ten times better –if you are into Canadian film – is C.R.A.Z.Y . . . a film with real people, real performances, humour and other emotions besides the "dramatic" ones . . . and a much surer director's hand. It will make up for the ennui and gruesomeness of The Hanging Garden.

5. A film to ponder on

Author: Gordon-11 from Earth
24 June 2008

This film is about a man coming back to his dysfunctional home after he left suddenly 10 years ago.

Right from the beginning, the family is already shown to be dysfunctional and unhappy. The initial wedding scene is unromantic, as it is clear that Rosemary did not want to marry. The grandmother has troubling dementia symptoms, and the father is alcoholic. It exposes a lot of sad and turbulent things that can happen: father's alcoholism, battered mother unable to stand up for herself, parents not being able to accept the son's sexuality, the haunting process of dementia and the destructive power of unresolved grief.

A powerful scene is when William challenges his mother why she has not left her husband. "How will I pay my bills" she says. It's a sad fact, but it is happening to a lot of people right now.

The longer I stayed watching "The Hanging Garden", the more fascinating it became. "The Hanging Garden" has an engaging and complicated plot which is open to interpretation. The ending is unexpected and powerful. It is a film to ponder on, not a film for a popcorn night.

6. How did I miss this?



Author: [miler-5](#) from Canada
25 April 2008

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

As a gay Canadian, I am embarrassed to confess that I had not heard of "The Hanging Garden" until it was broadcast by CBC (with all the potty words). Is it Babylon with the exile of the Jews i.e. a second Garden of Eden or the suicide of a troubled youth? In any event, it follows the dynamics of a family under stress – a wedding and everything that is raised when family members congregate after a long separation.

I salute the performance of Troy Veinotte who, like a meteorite, lights up the screen as the young Sweet William and disappears from view much as the young actors of "Who Has Seen the Wind" The most complex character is Fletcher, brilliantly played by Joel S. Keller. How can he marry Sweet William's sister after his youthful flirtations with Sweet William?

7. Watch it for Kerry Fox



Author: [henry_cloud](#) from Australia
6 June 2006

The best thing about this film is Kerry Fox. Even though the story centers around the homecoming of the homecoming of former fat kid Sweet William (Chris Leavins) it is Fox who shines throughout the film. At times visually stunning, the art direction unfortunately does not distract the viewer from the fact that the character of Sweet William comes across as unlikeable, despite attempts to garner the audience's sympathies. The character of Sweet William's grandmother is touchingly portrayed and there are some tender scenes involving her. I liked it and hated it. Oh, I forgot to mention . . . is Violet a boy or a girl? I couldn't tell.

8. Flowers and herbs in the garden



Author: [jotix100](#) from New York

18 July 2005

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

We saw the film in its original release. Not having seen it since then, we decided to take another view the other night, as it was a haunting piece of film-making. Thom Fitzgerald directs his own material about a family's disintegration amid an internal crisis.

The film shows a family in three different epochs of their lives. The father, Whiskey Mac and his wife, Iris, are seen in their suburban home where they are raising two children. The segments are divided into chapters and all take their names from flowers and herbs.

The main conflict in the film is within Sweet William, who as a teen ager is haunted by his latent homosexuality. The object of his interest is Fletcher, the school friend who isn't at all repulsed by William's advances, which are obvious. When they are caught in the act by the zealous grandmother, the family goes to pieces. Sweet William, in shame, hangs himself from a tree in the garden. This, we realize is only a symbolic way to show that like his own mother, Iris, both have fled the home in search of a more normal life. While Sweet Williams returns, completely transformed into a slender man, the mother is never heard of.

The message of the film seems to be how a family secret becomes the breaking point and its demise. Whiskey Mac sees the hanging figure of his teen aged son right in the middle of the garden. It's a painful reminder that he has lost him. Rosemary ends up marrying Fletcher, who seems to be game for a sexual encounter with the present William.

Mr. Fitzgerald has guided his excellent casts into giving performances that are true to life. Peter MacMeill, Kerry Fox, Chris Leavins, Troy Veinotte, Seana McKenna, Sarah Polley, and the rest, show an understanding for the material.

While this is a somewhat difficult film to sit through, Mr. Fitzgerald film deserves to be seen.

9. how wonderful!



Author: [troyfan](#) from United States

13 April 2005

I just caught this movie on cable and loved it immediately. Troy Veinotte did a fabulous job, he broke my heart in that role. I wish he'd do more work, or at least show up here and there. I can't seem to locate any interviews he's done, and Hanging Garden seems to be his only role to date.

We want more Troy! I think that boy is just flat out adorable.

The entire movie is now one of my all time favorites. I'll be watching this at least once every six months or so.

I understand that it was a very difficult role for Troy to tackle, but I'm beyond appreciative of the work he did there. Someone needs to nudge him to do more projects.

10. This movie is haunting and sad but also thoughtful and sometimes hopeful.



Author: [mallen8486](#) from United States

27 January 2005

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

What is up with this film? So he is hanging in the garden, but is he dead or what? He tried to kill himself, because of being gay or dysfunctional, which one? Or did his dysfunction die when he left? Yikes I am so haunted by this movie and the performance of the young actor, that played him as a teen, was remarkable. I have not seen many movies from Canada and this was really good albeit confusing to me!! Did that make sense? Part of the movie seemed cut-up—I saw it on Cinemax but I guess they could have shown an edited version. It was weird when Fletcher married the sister, is that because he could not have Willie? And the little girl was the daughter of Willie and the prostitute? Wow, can you imagine that happening to a kid, he didn't want to go to her, in the first place. The grandmother's portrayal was really interesting. Was she really crazy or just like that because of the heavy duty dysfunction, in the house, for all those years?

11. Powerful but not perfect



Author: [preppy-3](#) from United States

14 January 2005

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

Sweet William (Chris Leavins) returns to his family's house after being gone for 10 years. He came at the request of his sister (Kerry Fox) who is getting married. He left home because he was gay and couldn't deal with his family's HEAVY dysfunction. While back home he starts to flashback to his childhood . . .and begins to realize some unpleasant things about himself and his family.

This is basically yet another movie about a dysfunctional family . . .but this is a very good one. It's well-done (on next to no budget) and has some beautiful (if obvious) symbolism using flowers and nature. The story also took some unexpected turns I didn't see coming. Also the gay

themes are handled very well and explicitly—that may bother some people. The acting is superb all the way through—Leavins and Fox are just incredible. And it DOES have a happy ending which I didn't really believe for one second—but it still works.

My only complaints—there's virtual non-stop swearing through the movie, and can we have just ONE movie about a dysfunctional family that DOESN'T have incest? Also look for a young Sarah Polley in a small role. I give it an 8.

12.



Author: [desperateliving](#) from Canada

2 September 2004

I'd seen portions of this film on TV when I was about 12, and it frightened me — I thought it a perversely arousing horror film. Watching it now, I see that it's actually a pretty smartly made literary piece about a family (I could only remember the disturbing images indicated by the film's title). It does have its share of comedy — there's a lightness in tone that comes mainly from the profuse swearing of the Maritime newlywed (Kerry Fox) who takes part in one of the more awkward marriage processions in recent memory (which also features Ashley MacIsaac on fiddle), and whose marriage instigates the return of her ten-years-gone brother, William. The telling of the film is centered around three tenses of William's life — his childhood memories, his fat teenage years, and his current appearance — which are cut up, rearranged, and presented to us, though the unique thing is that Fitzgerald chooses also to surreally intersperse them together into the present one: our current William sees his young self using food as a comfort, and he sees his teen self leave behind his obese body in favor of his current slim frame.

I liked the way that Fitzgerald chose to tackle the mind's abstract identity in this very literal way and I think it makes the film more interesting than its abusive-father/thoughtful-mother family drama otherwise would be. There are some nice touches in the film, like William's apparent young sister who he seems to have swapped gender roles with, and there are some really clever scenes like the one where the current William rushes to help his father — and his father seeing that his grown son has been playing dress-up; or the scene where his mother has to listen to her son's first sexual experience with a woman. The performances are uniformly good for the film's intent, but Sarah Polley stands out as doing something beyond what's merely required. 8/10

13. Dysfunction junction



Author: [George Parker](#) from Orange County, CA USA

3 June 2004

"The Hanging Garden" is a slice-of-dysfunctional-life dramady with a coming-of-age flashback which takes you into the tangled web of peculiar family matters and relationships of a Nova Scotia family who live in shadow of a drunkenly abusive patriarch. The quirk infested family includes a gay asthmatic son, a foul mouthed daughter, a wishy-washy mother, a senile old granny, the abusive gardener father, and a kid. The film centers on the grossly overweight son who hangs himself from a tree and remains there as a sort of macabre metaphor for familial dysfunction while living on as a skinny adult and achieving some semblance of normalcy. In spite its obvious weirdness, this earthy flick manages to ground itself with a sense of reality while showing the constant struggle to function in spite of the characters' fractured coping skills. Not for everyone, this fist outing for writer/director Thom Fitzgerald is, IMHO, better than his more recent film "The Event". Fodder for those into quirky flicks about dysfunctional families. (B)

14. The worst movie I've ever seen



Author: [steele-12](#)

14 September 2003

Based on reviews that I've read I expected something other than this bitter dose of misanthropy. The roles are pastiches that are so over-played as to be wearying. The plot line proceeds in a grueling and gruesome hatefulness to a foregone conclusion. Not a redeeming moment to this turkey.

15. A wonderful little movie

Author: [causeimreal \(causeimreal@loveable.com\)](#) from Tupelo, MS

4 September 2003

I first discovered "the hanging garden" on Sundance, and I felt in love from the first viewing. This movie is wonderful. It deals with real issues in a very simplistic way. The cast was wonderful, and I really enjoyed the guy who played sweet William. I would recomend it to anyone, but i will say this: I find it to be one that you watch alone so you can get your own thoughts and ideas about it.

16. the Garden of mismatched souls



Author: [Yngvar Myrvold](#) from Tonsberg, Norway

15 October 2002

Sweet William, Rosemary, Violet, Basil and the rest. Named after flowers and herbs, people growing together in your typical family garden of mismatched souls. Little William, trying to be something that sets him apart from the rest, something nobody can touch or change. He grows

up to be a gay and obese teenager. Lusting after his closest friend. Not the easiest of lives. We meet Willy 10 years later, returning home to celebrate his sister Rosemary's wedding. He is now a slim, attractive young man. But what has happened during those ten years? And who is the little boy running around the house?

Every time I watch this small masterpiece, new layers of meaning turn up. The plot structure gives away some undiscovered truths, together with dialogue pointers I didn't notice before. That, to me, is a film worth seeing! When we showed this at our local film society, it got a great reception, one of the best we ever had for a film.

The Hanging garden is short, bittersweet and – sadly – true to life. You'll find something in this garden for you, whoever you may be!

17. Thom Fitzgerald is exceptional



Author: Barry-44 from Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
25 September 2002

The Hanging Garden is my favorite all-time movie. The storyline is perfect and the camera shots would have pleased Alfred Hitchcock. Thom Fitzgerald, its stunning director, ties everything together. I have watched this movie several times — each time seeing much more.

18. Great as long as you can follow it



Author: Raleon
10 September 2002

I didn't really like the look of the film because it was bright and hard on the eyes, but the story line was so perfect. The symbolism of his 'death' and the developing of the story really made this movie worthy to be a Canadian classic. I thought the acting was great from everyone on it. The father also made me uncomfortable most of the time but that was probably the point.

19. This movie is nervous and uncomfortably over-acting.



Author: jowang
4 June 2001

This movie is nervous and uncomfortably over-acted. A story of hatred like such is not at all surprising nowadays. But the director seems too restless to do a good film.

I have seen many of gloomy movies and liked some of them, but not this one.

20. Fully logical in my view (spoiler warning—plot discussed)

Author: [Eric Rodriguez \(eric.rodriquez2@phs.com\)](mailto:eric.rodriquez2@phs.com) from Encino, CA
18 January 2001

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

Death indeed takes many forms, and Thom Fitzgerald presents one of them here in a very dramatic way. William comes home ten years after his, but it was of course not an actual death, rather the termination of a life of obesity, ridicule and insecurity. Fletcher's rejection, and the ensuing small-town gossip, are what finally caused him to flee to the big city and cut off all communication with family and friends. He returns, reborn as a slim, handsome urbanite, who will not be satisfied until that rejection is reversed.

There is a lot of confusion among viewers of this film regarding the corpse that appears to be hanging in the garden. While at least three family members recognize it, it has never physically existed. William has survived the suicide attempt (rather than give in, he is still struggling when the scene ends), and is thus alive ten years later. What hangs from the tree is the broken spirit of a very troubled boy—and the entity that reveals the undercurrent of the plot.

Though in appearance a mature adult, William behaves at Rosemary's wedding as if he were trying to experience the childhood he missed. He is late for the ceremony, is dancing with his grandmother in her attic room while he is supposed to be with the rest of the wedding party, and hides under a table during the reception so he can throw flower petals onto the grass for guests to slip on. The pleasures of youth are abruptly halted when he must take care of his drunken father and then help organize a search for his missing mother. Compounding the difficulties are visions of himself as a young boy, using food to assuage hurt feelings, and of course the hanging `corpse.'

Later, as both of them envision the corpse, Rosemary reveals to William that she opted to hold her wedding in the garden so as to remember her brother as he `left,' rather than as he `came back.' Although she doesn't want to let go of the overweight, `Sweet William,' the adult will have no part of it and sees his chance to put it all to rest when Fletcher comes on to him down on the dock, the site of an earlier affectionate encounter. After confirming that he holds great attraction over his brother-in-law, William fakes an asthma attack (he has no problem running up the hill), and goes to bury the corpse. Having given up on reliving the past in a more pleasant way, he opts for putting it to rest so he can start anew.

Whiskey Mac, like Rosemary, wishes to hold on to the boy he knew ten years ago. It is revealed that he, too, has sensed the corpse when William tells him he has buried it. Devastated, the father tries to exhume it, but the son will not permit him. Of course no physical remains would appear, as none exist, but William doesn't want his father going through the motions of digging up what should be left in place. As George adamantly stated to Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the boy is `dead' and there is no use bringing him up again.

21. Don't miss it!



Author: [paula-60](#) from minneapolis, usa
4 January 2001

This is a wonderfully affecting movie I stumbled on by accident. I found the story deeply touching and beautifully told. Not a false step in this movie, the music is perfect. The pain of the hero is rendered so precisely that I found it overwhelming, the hanging scene haunts me still.

22. A film difficult to appreciate.

Author: [burneyfan \(burneyfan@btinternet.com\)](#) from Manchester, England.
9 September 2000

The main obstacle in the way of my enjoying this film is the disconcerting elements of surrealism and irrationality inserted into a film that is in every other way naturalistic. I must say I had some difficulty coming to terms with this aspect of the film which at first glance made no sense at all. I was irritated by it. Taken at face value this aspect of the film was ludicrous. It goes like this:

We have a grotesquely obese teenager who has a homosexual encounter. He is caught in the act by his grandmother and, as a result, is taken by his mother to see a young woman who's forte is sexual initiation. Either this, his previous experience or his obesity, depresses him so much that he commits suicide. And we know he succeeds because all the flowers in the garden die with him. But, and this is where the madness and contradictions start, he comes back from the dead ten years later metamorphosed into a handsome, slim young man! And he finds his doppelganger still hanging from the tree in the garden!

Now a doppelganger is a figment of someone's imagination, a wraith that doesn't really exist; and if it had remained as such, say a symbolic representation of his earlier life, I would have had little difficulty in going along with it. But no. He touches it and his dad hugs it and he then buries it and his dad tries to dig it up. Well, you can't bury a doppelganger, so it must be a real body, a body that's been hanging from a tree for ten years without showing any signs of decomposition. And if it is a real dead body and it's his real dead body, how come he's still alive?

Now if you can accept all this as not being real behaviour but as some elaborate metaphor for his wish to be free of his past and his dad's wish to cling onto it, then you might just enjoy the film. It has a lot of good things going for it.

23.



Author: [harry-76](#) from Cleveland, Ohio
11 July 2000

So you thought your family was strange. Just take a look at Sweet William's clan, and give thanks after all for your brood. A young, well adjusted man returns home after an absence of several years to find old memories returning to haunt him. As the film weaves in and out of time zones, we experience a full portrait of the ultimate dysfunctional family. Are folks really like this, or is it just something in the Nova Scotian water? Nary a dull moment in this stimulating, often thought provoking expose. If you're game, take a deep breath and enter the world of "The Hanging Garden."

24. A surreal fabric of past and present

Author: [Milpool](#) from Fredericton
11 November 1999

The Hanging garden is one of those fine metaphors about familial existence, self explanation, and coping with a certain kind of sexuality in a community which will have none of it. It's central character, a man who returns home after years away, seems out of place in such a crude and rugged environment as the East Coast. He must, in a certain kind of mindset, face what he was, and try to bury that past for good. His struggle, one of growing to realize what has happened and how he has changed, leads him on a bizarre odyssey of acceptance and growth. The rest of his family may seem somewhat rude and unkempt, but keep in mind that people are pretty much this way in the Martimes at any right. A fine film, especially by Canadian standards.

25. One of the best films I have ever seen.



Author: [chapin-2](#) from New York City
7 October 1999

A lovely, intelligent film that challenges the viewer's assumptions about reality, while celebrating the power of memory and redemption. I have rarely been so moved by the beauty of a film, visually and verbally. The performances are real, the writing superb. It also boasts one of the most hilarious weddings in cinema history.

26. Great filmmaking

Author: [Mike Salvati \(mikesalvati@yahoo.com\)](#) from New Jersey, USA
16 June 1999

This fantastic, unassuming Canadian film is one of the best I have seen in a long time. The story is wonderfully realized, the performances are great, and everything feels very real.

27. Opulent



Author: [anonymous](#) from LA

21 February 1999

Sometimes overly poetic in its gardening parallels, this story of a young man who returns to home after a number of years is intense, mysterious, and certainly not lacking in style. In a unique mixture of flashback fantasy sequences, where characters in the past actually interact with those in the present, we see an overweight teenager come to grips with his homosexuality and the returning adult come to grips with his childhood self.

This is an amazing directorial debut, and the abundance of cinematic tricks are a welcome storytelling tool. Virgin Mary Icons smile at us; a grown man witnesses the suicide he committed in his youth.

The director chooses not to draw thick boundaries around the sexuality of his characters, but doesn't fall into the trap of making them frustratingly ambiguous. Often this leaves the sour aftertaste of homophobia.

The mysterious final chapter closes without the pomp and glory that more established directors might have resorted to. It's subtlety complements its outlandishness in a way that doesn't leave you confused.

28.



Author: [bgilch](#) from Montreal, Quebec

7 August 1998

Hanging Garden is a small, intensely felt film about a family in tatters and a son whose own problems are eclipsed until he does something he can't take back. Given the film's major conceit is a breach in family fabric that can't be woven back in, magic realism is an applicable term—but only so if shot through the caustic self-wounding humour of the Maritimes, where I lived for six years. If this seems dour, then consider the take-off marriage sequence that opens the film: drunkenness, homoeroticism, Celtic music madness and four-dozen f-words. This film is a gorgeous if painful tribute to growing up in a remove that already seems past its age, in an ocean playground whose garden has gone to seed. This film was ranked, and fairly, as the best Canadian film of 1997 by the Jay Stone of the Globe & Mail (Canada's national newspaper), and if that makes Americans laugh, then consider this is a ranking ahead of Sweet Hereafter, which only made it to the Best Director Oscar Nomination and Cannes Recognition for Atom Egoyan and was also Roger Ebert's #2 film of the year. Adulations all around are deserving for this home-grown production. The film only suffers from inexperience with some actors and having to come up with a conclusion for a tale that can't logically have one. And the parents are

excellent in it too, especially the mum. At the singular, crucial sequence of the film all the elements of the film – colour, symbolism, lamentation and ladyslipperknots – fuse in breathtaking splendor, and I mean so in the inhaled gasp that graces the east coast 'yes '. It still stuns me in memoriam. Four Stars * * * *

29. Saved by the kids

Author: Jon Reeves (jreeves) from Los Angeles, California
28 July 1998

Sadly, even the adult we're supposed to like (William) isn't too likeable, but fortunately the kids are. Well acted (again, especially by the teens) and affecting, though the family doesn't seem as screwed up as the one in Buffalo '66. Those looking for a straightforward script that resolves everything logically will be disappointed.

Appendix B

Lilies User Reviews from the IMDb.com

43 Reviews in total

1. stunning and haunting

Author: [zagauk](#) from Bristol UK

9 April 2016

Minor niggle – you wear a purple stole to heard confessions, not a white one.

However, this is one of the best films I have seen so far this year. The 'play within a play' like Hamlet makes for very interesting viewing as the back story unfolds.

Can anyone cast light on the continual lighting of matches? Or is it merely to 'cast light on the situation'?

And a question for someone clever – We know that the haunting and beautiful background music is by the Hilliard Ensemble and includes a Requiem mass and parts of Tenebrae – but what disc is it from? I have looked at their discography but can't find it.

2. Passion, Tragedy, and Breathtaking Beauty . . .All Rolled Into One



Author: [aoichou](#) from Arlington, Virginia

20 July 2011

This movie is composed of nothing if not polar opposites . . . joy and pain, sin and redemption, love and jealousy, life and loss. Fortunately, every emotion is so exquisitely expressed in this film, every range of the spectrum explored, that what results in nothing short of cinematic perfection. I genuinely cared about every character in this piece, felt their struggles and joys with them, cried with them, laughed with them. This film leaves no corner of the heart untouched.

The cinematography is glorious, blending the scenes from the prisoners' play with realistically portrayed ones, and I'm not even going to mention just how beautiful the filming locations are because I cannot do them justice. Brent Carver gives a stunning, flawless performance as the Countess; I was also deeply moved by Alexander Chapman's role as Lydie—Anne—And yet, I

must say that no one touched me quite so deeply as the lovers, played by Jason Cadieux and Danny Gilmore. The chemistry between the two simply took my breath away. Together, they give this film its heart and soul.

In short, everything about the piece flows like water, the water which is ever present in the movie, be it the "Mediterranean" lake or the flooded chapel. Seamless. Reflective. Beautiful. As I walked away from this film (though only for the time being, as it deserves many more viewings) I felt so much, and yet all I could do was smile.

This film deserves your time. I cannot emphasize that enough.

3. Stunning and Avante Garde



Author: [dreamer81465](#) from United States

24 July 2010

Initially set in a prison in 1952, this film is a treat for the senses. This work is based on a play and unlike most film adaptations of plays, one can easily see the transition back to the stage. Jason Cadieux is wonderful as the young Simon. Simon is in love with Vallier in 1919 Quebec. It seems that everyone knows that these boys are in love and they turn a blind eye to the boys, except their classmate, Bilodieu. Throughout the film, Bilodieu hounds the boys and snobbishly turns his nose up to them when he is not condemning them for the mortal sin of homosexuality. All of the characters in this film are played by men since the play is being put on in a prison. Especially notable are Brent Carver as the Countess De Tilly and Alexander Chapman as Lydie-Anne (Vallier's mother). At some points, it is easy to forget that these "women" are actually men and we get caught up in the trials that they are going through. The performances are powerful and the message is even more powerful. The message of this film is that justice is eternal and that a man may even meet justice at the end of his life.

Was the above review useful to you?

4. One of the best films ever created



Author: [Paz \(fuxing626\)](#) from new york, ny

30 May 2002

This film is proof that some of the most iridescent, incredible films never make it to mainstream America. Barely anyone I know has even heard of this movie, and it's quite saddening. Although it has won numerous awards and lots of prestige in Canada, where it was made, I've often seen it lying on the shelf untouched at Blockbuster or gay film shops.

The movie begins with a prisoner named Simone who requests that a specific priest come to

hear his confession. The priest, perplexed as to why he has been summoned, arrives at the prison, not knowing what to expect. It is soon divulged that the priest has some confessing of his own to be done when the prisoners trap him in his confessional box and begin to perform a play. This play is about Simone's childhood, when Simone was attending a Catholic all-boys boarding school and was in a gay relationship with his schoolmate, Valier. They keep their love clandestine until another schoolmate, Bilodeau (the priest as an adolescent), unearths something of what the two lovers have been doing. He confronts them about it, calling them a "disease," when it is revealed later that he is more insidious than they are.

Things take another dramatic turn when Simone's father discovers his son has kissed a boy and mutilates his body with a whip. Out of searing rage, Simone succumbs to arson. A Parisian woman (who is portrayed by a male actor because the play is being performed by male prisoners) visits the school and falls in love with Simone. Despite the distinctly male features on her which expose the actor's gender, she does an excellent job of emulating a pristine, romantic woman desperately seeking love.

Simone repudiates Valier, saying "it's time he started thinking about girls" and that he plans to marry the Parisian woman. Valier is devastated and runs to his mother, who is scorned by the rest of society because she believes herself to be a countess. She is shockingly compassionate and supportive when she learns of Valier's homosexuality. At the engagement banquet for Simone and his fiancée, Valier sabotages the celebration by dressing like a Greek God and reciting a monologue from the romantic Greek play he and his beloved were rehearsing together in the beginning of the film. And I can't tell you the rest. It'll ruin it. All I know is everyone should see this movie—especially gay Catholics. Incredible directing, eloquent dialogue, wonderfully abstract scenery—there's no way this movie could have been done better!

5. Quietly Stunning



Author: [Bruce](#) from Massachusetts
13 September 2002

This is a film of rare and astonishing brilliance, and unlike anything I personally have ever encountered before. It is exquisitely photographed and edited, and the acting is first rate all round. The all-male cast portraying both men and women might be off-putting for some, but it is performed so expertly that one forgets this detail – it is a film that magnificently transcends gender. In particular is Brent Carver's resplendent turn as the 'mad countess,' the gentle, guileless mother of one of the young heroes. The story is a heartbreaking tale of love, jealousy, and ultimately, of Judgement Day, of the Day of Reckoning. That its storyline is about gay love should not put off heterosexual film goers, because the theme is timeless and universal. A bold and brilliant 'must see.'

Was the above review useful to you?

6. Achingly Beautiful . . .



Author: [SamLowry-2](#) from Port Orchard, WA, USA

15 April 1999

"Lilies" is an achingly beautiful work. The acting, cinematography, music and sets are stunning. The use of only male actors, including for female characters, seems right here. And in the final analysis, the best and worst of human emotion (especially concealed jealousy) becomes so vividly portrayed that one is not sure whether to laugh, cry, or yell out with anger at the characters' actions. Anyone who considers themselves a "cinema buff" should put this one on their "must see" list. So, when does the DVD come out???

7. The most beautiful gay film ever

Author: [ckmercuri](#) from Miami, FL

19 August 2002

This film stands out in my collection as the most beautiful gay love story on film so far. It's lyrical story-telling is accented by it's Romeo & Juliet-inspired forbidden love theme, while avoiding any political message that plagues today's current stream of gay love stories. With it's gorgeous location, haunting sound-track and surreal moments of simple tenderness, Lilies succeeds at simply being a beautiful film.

8. Haunting and beautiful . . .



Author: [Tesse](#)

2 October 1999

Everyone does things they would rather forget. Lilies is about one man's horrible sin returning to haunt him, 40 years after the fact. As a rash child, young Jean Bilodeau did all he could to separate gay lovers Simon and Vallier- not for any high-minded moralistic reason, but out of his own jealousy and desire for Simon. 40 years later, Bilodeau and Simon meet again, and witness their history performed by prisoners in a Quebecois jail. What results is heartwrenching and beautiful.

The cinematography of Lilies is flawless, moving effortlessly between 1952 and 1912 with lush, vivid colours. The performances are also excellent, with Brent Carver a notable standout as Vallier's deluded mother (as the movie is a play set in a jail, we see the male prisoners perform all of the roles, including the female ones). Jason Cadieux and Danny Gilmore are beautiful as the young lovers going through the awkward pangs of adolesence, coming out, and first love. A truly beautiful movie for anyone who loves a good cinematic experience, I cannot recommend Lilies enough.

9. Of a Shakespearian genre



Author: acearms from San Antonio, Texas
8 October 2003

A truly remarkable film. The characters are all played by males reminiscent of the days of Shakespeare. And what a delight to watch. I've seen it several times and am always impressed with the acting as well as the plot. This was a truly artistic endeavor above the traditional film making. One has to flow with the several roles to understand the interaction of the characters and appreciate the actors in those roles. Forget the gay aspect, and appreciate the brilliant acting and roles played out. Not a typical Hollywood mill production, but something with true artistry. A must see.

10. Excellent cinematography, musical score, casting and story.



Author: bob-504 from Dallas, Texas
27 November 1999

Luscious cinematography, soulful musical score, terrific casting, and limited use of revelatory flashbacks to dramatize the theme of societally-defined mores and criminal behavior. Artistic and judicious use of nudity and sexuality to illustrate the dilemmas of public versus private morality.

11. Amazing use of "play" technique in a film.

Author: Ronan Carford
29 December 2002

I have seen Lilies on more than one occasion, and am amazed each time at the intricate and ingenious use of the "theatrical" in the movie. When watching the movie from the beginning, it doesn't take a moron to realize that the "play" is being put on by inmates at a prison.

Staying true to the "setting" of the play, the movie uses males to play all roles, including the roles of women. It is unique as the characters in the "play" react and respond to the female roles as if they were women and not men playing women's roles.

There is an incredible depth to the movie that chronicles the life and love lost by Simone through the deception and lies of the "church." There is much more meaning here than just the plight of one man. The movie tell the story of many men and women around the world who are persecuted, imprisoned, and often sacrifice their lives for being true to their love of the same sex. It is good to see a movie that does not portray a same sex relationship as one of casual sex or one-night stands. The relationship is one of committment, of trust, of pain and caring, of

going through the good and the bad together. Heterosexuals do not have the corner on good relationships. This movie tries to portray the love between two people and the struggles they faced, largely due to the intolerance and rigidity of the church.

12. A haunting poetic tragic doomed love affair



Author: timleemail@aol.com

14 February 2001

After a spate of disappointing gay films in the mid 90's, Lilies appeared from Canada as a fresh bouquet presenting a refreshing change of pace. Improving upon the play its based on, Lilies uses various cinematic conventions to its advantage, with cuts between prison re-enactments and the actual events given seamlessly and often artistically breathtaking. The use of cross gender casting (this is an all male film) is humorous to a degree, but never in a mocking drag queen tone. We come to believe these men are really women. And the coming of age love story at the center of the plot, done to death by so many other films, is achingly tender.

It was once said that gay work has to have someone die in it and this film is no exception. But the deaths portrayed here and the long hidden betrayal finally revealed are handled quite effectively. The artifice involved only adds an extra layer of beauty upon the story. A remarkable achievement.

13. The play's the thing wherein . . .



Author: [Richard E. Dodson](#) from Ojai, CA

26 October 1999

. . . I'll catch the conscience of the Bishop (to paraphrase Hamlet). 'Lilies' is a morality play about love, murder, and retribution – three themes that have dominated classical drama for millennia. But, although it borrows heavily from Shakespeare and classical Greek drama, 'Lilies' is in many ways new and experimental also. The manner in which the scenes of the hauntingly beautiful "imaginary" landscape of northern Quebec are interleaved with the somber gray of the "real" prison set in which the play within a play unfolds is nothing short of brilliant. I've never seen anything quite like it in a movie before.

The events that form the core of the play took place in Roberval, Quebec, in the summer of 1912: Two boys, Simon and Vallier, find themselves madly in love with each other while rehearsing a school production of "The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian." Their passion does not go unnoticed, however; Simon's father flogs him mercilessly, and their schoolmate Bilodeau watches them with increasing envy. In a final fit of rage when Simon rebuffs him, Bilodeau exacts a horrible revenge on the two lovers. Justice eventually catches up with Bilodeau, however, when he is held hostage in the local prison and forced to watch a play (written by

Simon and performed by the inmates) that depicts the events of that fateful summer forty years earlier.

I really can't find much to fault about this movie – other than its length – at only 90 minutes, it seemed too short. For the most part, the acting was superb, with special notice going to Brent Carver as the piteous Countess de Telly. In many ways his portrayal of her reminded me of an aging Ophelia, and one soon forgets that he is a man playing a woman's role. On a scale of 1 to 10, I rate 'Lilies' at 9.5. It is definitely a movie that should be viewed more than once.

14. A must see for gay men.



Author: Steven from Missouri, USA
20 November 2000

Okay, I will explain my summary. This movie is not about being gay, as are most films whose principal characters are. The characters are not what straight cinema normally portrays us to be either. The story is broader than that, there is a purpose in bringing us into these men's lives. I was reminded of how intense love was, how consuming and selfless youthful love can be. However, those feelings were contrasted with memories of vengefulness of unrequited loves gone by too. Straight or gay you will enjoy this film.

15. An excellent, disturbing film, about love, revenge, and justice.



Author: Marc (westerner) from Santa Cruz, CA
25 May 2000

We find ourselves in Quebec, in 1952. The local Roman Catholic bishop has come to a local prison to hear the confession of a dying man, a man he knew in his childhood, that had been in prison for 40 years for committing some heinous crime.

When he gets there, the inmates, local chaplain, and prison guards imprison him, and force him to watch his former school-mate, who is not terminally ill, put on a play that re-creates the events that led to his imprisonment. This movie moves between the crude props and costumes made from scraps and rags and the elegant, wealthy past with flawless precision.

It's a story of a love gone awry, of twisted values, self-loathing and lust, jealousy, murder, and vengeance.

Many may be put off by its overtly gay cast and story line, or the fact that male and female roles are played by men (as they were years ago, and still are in all-male schools overseas).

If one can get by these prejudices, and prejudices regarding what "gay behavior" is supposed to

be (this movie has feminine and masculine acting men, in both gay and straight roles), this movie will keep you riveted to your seat.

16. A beautifully constructed and well acted film.



Author: [dj-58](#) from Atlanta GA
28 August 1999

This film is beautifully written, photographed, and acted. The fluidity with which the film moves between memory and reenactment is astounding and almost dreamlike. In lesser skilled hands, this concept could easily have seemed trite or silly; in *Lilies*, it is innovative and masterful.

17. The Iago's of the World Never Win



Author: [nycritic](#)
25 May 2006

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

Never trust a confession that a childhood friend wants to make to you because more than likely it comes with an entire onslaught of a carefully planned stage adaptation of the reason he hates you so much. That's the blueprint for Michel Marc Bouchard's play of the same name. It at first looked, to me, to be a little stylized, like some of Marguerite Duras' short novels — "The Ravishment of Lol Stein" for example — but once the movie takes off, a thing that happens quite immediately, it draws you in.

A seamless transition from past events and the present, staged events in the prison facility where the older Bilodeau, now a Bishop, has gone to hear this confession, makes the entirety of the movie. *LILIES* evolves with the surety of a mystery even when we know something pretty bad has happened between the Bishop and the prisoner Simon who hates his guts, but it's like a marvelous puzzle worth solving — you can't turn away.

It seems, in 1912, two boys loved each other very much. Simon and Vallier were carefree, mindless of what anyone else would think. Played by the young Canadian actors Jason Cadieux and Danny Gilmore, they look perfectly matched and complement each other, Cadieux being the more masculine and therefore dominant, Gilmore being the feminine, more malleable and romantic man, desperately and unabashedly in love.

But, as it goes with people in love (regardless the gender, I will always state that), there is always a monkey wrench. That is Bilodeau, a man with his own designs on Simon, who the very thought of him kissing another man drives him crazy with rage and who bellows left and right that the two of them are involved in something "sick and evil". Played by Matthew Ferguson, he

makes you literally hate this character: his manic glee in denouncing their love, his "prayers" that Simon see the "error of his ways" are only matched by what I recall being Winona Ryder's ferocious performance in *THE CRUCIBLE* or Bonita Granville's openly evil character in *THESE THREE*.

In *Bilodeau* the film has its villain even when in the middle of the movie his character somewhat stands by the sidelines and watches the progressive separation between Simon and Vallier due to other circumstances. The arrival of a personality, Lydie—Anne (played by Alexander Chapman), and her subsequent engagement to Simon throws in a deeper wrench — she is unaware of Simon's true desires, and even more unaware that Bilodeau is conspiring to do some grievous harm. Alexander Chapman is pretty compelling to watch as this socialite: I couldn't see a man in drag as much as a brittle woman who knew her way around people; seeing him play his male counterpart as events shift back to the present is watching a completely different person altogether.

The same can't go for Brent Carver who plays another prison inmate and the Countess de Lilly. As the Countess he comes across at times as a more subdued Katharine Hepburn in *THE AFRICAN QUEEN*, but also as a man in drag. Even so, his is an interesting character to see because it requires a lot of control not to chew scenery when the opportunity presents itself — which is often, especially in a scene involving some pretty sharp dialog exchanges with Chapman. Even so, his death scene is very moving, more so due to the circumstances in which it takes place. That it makes Valliers's and Simon's bond stronger is compelling.

Where I believe the movie — and probably the play; I haven't read it so I must assume the movie is faithful to the material — fails is at its climax. While I'm not surprised at the revelation of who the Bishop is — many "men of the cloth" are little more than perverts usurping as the Voice of God because they can't face their own realities — his own punishment comes off as vague. It's as if the movie didn't know how to exact justice against him. In my world, the Bishop would have been tormented until the skin would have peeled off his body — eye for an eye. But maybe it's best to leave him alone. I can see why Simon even then wouldn't allow himself to dirty his hands with such human garbage. It would be best to let Life take care of this type of person; they always die alone and riddled with their inner cancer.

LILIES is a compelling watch. I loved its passion, its fearlessness in representing gay love, even at the moment of tragedy. Coming nine years prior to *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* it should share the honor of being a movie that was aimed at an audience ready to accept men professing love to each other, free of self-loathing and cultural constraints.

18. Beautiful and moving movie

Author: [kinophil-1 \(kinophil@hotmail.com\)](mailto:kinophil-1@hotmail.com) from Columbia SC
1 December 2004

I am writing mainly because the one comment I saw on this site was negative. I just watched the movie and it was gorgeous. Gorgeous scenery. Gorgeous men. Wonderful music. Jason Cadieux is gorgeous beyond words.

The movie is quite obviously set in a prison where there would be a lack of women. It is quite artistic. The use of men to play women is both campy, and artsy, hearkening back to Shakespeare. It is not done to get laughs however.

The twist in the movie is that the man who is to give his confession, hears a confession. It ends in a way that you must make up your mind about the punishment.

19. The most beautifly–told gay love story of all time.

Author: Justin Akin (justakin@aol.com) from Los Angeles, CA
16 July 1999

John Greyson's "Lillies" is a must–see for romantics of all sexual orientations. This tragic tale of love and betrayal is both simple in its beauty and complex in its telling as it weaves between past and present. The translation from stage to film — made even more complex by the fact that it is already about a play within a play — is handled brilliantly by Director Greyson.

The physical beauty of the two young leads against the visual beauty of the setting, the times, the costumes and the cinematography creates a visceral response as no other film ever has.

The love scenes are moving — including nudity and sex between men rarely shown on film — and the characters (all played by male actors) are brought to life by magnificent performances all around.

See this movie with a loved one, then tell all your friends.

And make sure you have plenty of Kleenex.

20. Passion, Tragedy, and Breathtaking Beauty . . .All Rolled Into One



Author: aoichou from Arlington, Virginia
20 July 2011

This movie is composed of nothing if not polar opposites . . . joy and pain, sin and redemption, love and jealousy, life and loss. Fortunately, every emotion is so exquisitely expressed in this film, every range of the spectrum explored, that what results in nothing short of cinematic perfection. I genuinely cared about every character in this piece, felt their struggles and joys with them, cried with them, laughed with them. This film leaves no corner of the heart untouched.

The cinematography is glorious, blending the scenes from the prisoners' play with realistically portrayed ones, and I'm not even going to mention just how beautiful the filming locations are because I cannot do them justice. Brent Carver gives a stunning, flawless performance as the Countess; I was also deeply moved by Alexander Chapman's role as Lydie—Anne—And yet, I must say that no one touched me quite so deeply as the lovers, played by Jason Cadieux and Danny Gilmore. The chemistry between the two simply took my breath away. Together, they give this film its heart and soul.

In short, everything about the piece flows like water, the water which is ever present in the movie, be it the "Mediterranean" lake or the flooded chapel. Seamless. Reflective. Beautiful. As I walked away from this film (though only for the time being, as it deserves many more viewings) I felt so much, and yet all I could do was smile.

This film deserves your time. I cannot emphasize that enough.

21. Stunning and Avante Garde



Author: [dreamer81465](#) from United States

24 July 2010

Initially set in a prison in 1952, this film is a treat for the senses. This work is based on a play and unlike most film adaptations of plays, one can easily see the transition back to the stage. Jason Cadieux is wonderful as the young Simon. Simon is in love with Vallier in 1919 Quebec. It seems that everyone knows that these boys are in love and they turn a blind eye to the boys, except their classmate, Bilodieu. Throughout the film, Bilodieu hounds the boys and snobbishly turns his nose up to them when he is not condemning them for the mortal sin of homosexuality. All of the characters in this film are played by men since the play is being put on in a prison. Especially notable are Brent Carver as the Countess De Tilly and Alexander Chapman as Lydie—Anne (Vallier's mother). At some points, it is easy to forget that these "women" are actually men and we get caught up in the trials that they are going through. The performances are powerful and the message is even more powerful. The message of this film is that justice is eternal and that a man may even meet justice at the end of his life.

22. Lilies — heartrendingly beautiful and unforgettable



Author: [michael144000](#) from United States

15 May 2010

I stumbled upon this amazing movie in a quality gay bookstore, and am I ever glad I did. It is now one of my very favorite films.

Not only does the film have moving, sensuously warm scenes of love between the devoted, beautiful, tender Vallier and the more reserved but handsome Simon, as suggested in the DVD photos — but it is a movie that will make you think about the nature of love, the importance of following one's own truth, the bitter poison of jealousy, and the aching inability of revenge to make up for loss endured. The terrible bitterness of homophobia is shown in a way that makes one realize how great a crime it is to hate love.

I was amazed at the fine acting, and the way the imaginative re-creations of the events of 1912 melt into the prison setting of 1952 and back again. I found the males acting the female parts to be quite convincing, and much of the time forgot they were really males.

The actors who played Vallier and Simon are to be congratulated for their courage and ability to be totally convincing as young men in love — Vallier as the embodiment of undying affection and Simon as a youth who must struggle with the truth of his sexual identity and his heart's deepest longing. The actor who played the countess is also very moving, and able to portray a wisdom and truth that transcend the slight insanity of that character.

I've watched the DVD a dozen times now, and weep for love every time when Vallier reads his letter, and during the engagement party scene, and during the bathtub scene.

Bishop Bilodeau's character is also played well, and reveals defense mechanisms like layers of an onion. The film is quite relevant in light of the Church scandals of late.

If you buy this film, you will never regret it.

23. From the Confessional



Author: [gradyharp](#) from United States

3 March 2006

LILIES, based on a Canadian play 'Les feluettes' by Michel Marc Bouchard, has been adapted to the screen by Bouchard and placed in the sensitive hands of director John Greyson, an artist who is able to indulge in surrealism with reality and make it work well. This very beautiful film is cast entirely with men despite the fact that there are women roles in the story. How does he make that work successfully without pandering to artiness? View this little film and make the discovery for your self.

Set in Quebec in a prison, Bishop Bilodeau (Marcel Sabourin) has been summoned from the outside to hear the confession of 'a very sick man' who has been imprisoned for 40 years for a murder. Upon the Bishop's arrival the audience knows something is amiss: despite the atmosphere of the prison as a stage accompanied by choral singing of plainsong (The Hilliard Ensemble) there are props and images that seem out of place in a grim prison. The Bishop is ushered into the confessional booth and when he opens the window to hear confession, the

person in the seat is Simon (Aubert Pallascio) the 'very sick' man who has planned for the bishop to watch a play depicting the 40 year old crime – a reverse on the confessional stance. Through a small aperture in the bishop's now locked confessional, the Bishop is forced to watch a reenactment of the incident 40 years ago when two young boys, Simon (Jason Cadieux) and Vallier (Danny Gilmore) were in love and the young future Bishop (Matthew Ferguson) was jealous of Vallier's attention from Simon and played a key role in 'murder' of Vallier that resulted in Simon's being accused and imprisoned. The atmosphere leading up to this act includes the reaction from the small town's homophobia and to Simon's sexual ambiguity that involves a strange lady Lydie–Anne (Alexander Chapman) who arrives from Paris via an air balloon. It is the interaction of the boys with the townsfolk, the new lady arrival who desires Simon's affections, and Vallier's understanding and self–sacrificing mother Countess De Tilly (Brent Carver) that leads to the fateful death of Simon. How the story ends in the confessional booth reversal is the beauty of the film that must be left unsaid for the drama to affect potential audiences of this movie.

The cast is all male because the whole story is a mise–en–scene, a play within a play, where all parts are acted by the prisoners for the sake of displaying truth to the Bishop. There is no pretense at making the men look like women except for the costumes and this enhances the message of the story. The actors are excellent and the impact of the story is powerful. Yes, this is a highly honored gay–themed film, but it is really more about the power of love both in youths and in thwarted adults that makes it a film for all audiences. Highly Recommended.
Grady Harp

24. not a gay movie as one might think



Author: [bbraat](#) from new york
28 September 2005

A beautifully made film. The way the movie flowed like quicksilver between the prison and the past was unbelievable. It was also great how the male actors, a la mode Shakespeare, played all the female roles. What was so good about that was that they didn't do so as hyper–female drag queens but simply as actors. after a while the viewer forgets that sex of the actors and focuses on the characters. I was surprised that this illusion held up despite several removals from the narrative when we are transported back to the present and the prison chapel and we see the actors as they really are. somehow the film keeps us from being jarred out of the movie and we once again are transported back to 1912. a profoundly moving story.

25. A gay Romeo & Juliet

Author: [Matthew Ignoffo \(mermatt@webtv.net\)](#) from Eatontown, NJ, USA
8 October 2000

The lilies of the title symbolize both dictatorship (the old French monarchy) and innocence. These, in turn, symbolize the sanctimonious judgements of homophobia and the passion of young male love which is a "state of the soul." We see the conflict between the earth-bound rational mind and the ecstasy of the divine spirit.

Something like the frame-story in MAN OF LA MANCHA, we are taken inside a prison where we witness a play within a play within a play. Slipping backwards and forwards in time, we see a confession which must be given — the confession that homophobia is rooted in fear of one's own sexuality.

This is a haunting trip into past guilt full of symbolic allusions such as a scourging, the vanity of narcissus, the dove of the divine, and the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.

The film is visually and musically stunning and spooky. It is one of the best films to delve into the mystery of sexuality, whether gay or straight.

26. A beautifully constructed work of art

Author: [teddw2ds](#) from Tulsa, OK
1 August 1999

Lilies starts out a little difficult to follow, but once you have grabbed ahold of the concept, which is stunningly unique and bold, it will draw you in until you are so enthralled you will not want it to end. This was a haunting and beautiful romance with clever plotting and truly original ideas. It was not only a great story, but also a joy to behold visually. I highly recommend it.

27. Excellent mover – very unknown



Author: [mooseburton](#) from Detroit, Michigan, USA
12 April 2009

Was searching for films on Netflix and came across this gem. Never heard of it and don't know any of the actors. Well acted and very powerful. It is one of those movies that takes place in real time, albeit with flashbacks. The subject matter may not be everyones cup of tea, but an excellent movie overall. It is a Canadian film and that may be why it did not get much exposure here in the US. If you are a fan of indie or gay oriented films then you will really like this. While the gay theme of this is an important and critical part of it. Don't judge this on that aspect. Judge it on the overall story and the way it was told.

28. Very Different



Author: [druidlord](#) from United Kingdom
14 October 2008

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

This film exceeds expectations on so many levels. The acting was a little stiff to start with but as you proceed into the film you pay less and less attention to it and begin to become enfolded in a different world. The fact that the other parts are all played by men seems to enhance the film once you've got over the initial shock of seeing them. I think both of the two leads (Young Simon and Vallier) played their parts admirably and deserve to go on to greater things.

The screen play was fantastic for me but I would like to read the book to see what I missed out on. I think that I agree with another poster in that the biggest disappointment for me was that the older Simon looked and sounded nothing like the younger version which was a shame. The Bishop Bilodeau was very believable and the supporting role of the Countess De Tilly where both played with eloquence and style. The music that accompanies the film enhances the experience, particularly towards the end of the film. But for me, the one thing that stood out above all of these was a one line sentence spoken by Simon as he holds Vallier in his arms after the death of the Countess De Tilly. He whispers "I got you" That was all but with the music of the Hillard Ensemble behind it, it proved to be the most simple and most powerfully moving line I think I've ever heard. It still brings me to tears even now and I will always remember it.

I love this film and I think its one that my family should watch for its uniqueness and moving portrayals.

Thank you to everyone involved. You did a stunning job.

29. Brilliant!



Author: [Britinmiami](#) from United States
21 August 2006

I really loved this movie. This was a tale well told and the acting was very impressive. I felt like I was watching a high quality play on Broadway! Brent Carver was brilliant and the whole cast wonderful. Very interesting to stick with a male cast, but it worked! At times you almost forgot that there were no women in this movie! The casting was superb and I thought the eye candy was excellent and they could act! The movie managed to create a wonderful environment that gave off a terrific atmosphere.

The story was so intriguing and kept you on the edge of your seat. I thought this was a really wonderful tale told extremely well and what a treat!

30. Difficult? Gay? Not really. But not only beautiful but also very clever and artistic



Author: Hanno Wupper from Netherlands

27 August 2005

Difficult? In the first dialog in the confessional it is explained clearly which two of the young men in the play are the two old men in the confessional. If you miss this, the plot is difficult to figure out. If you pay attention at that crucial moment, the movie is not difficult to understand at all.

Gay? Yes, we see gay young men loving each other. Does that make a 'gay movie'? It is a strong story, and it could not have happened like this in a purely heterosexual setting. If you find this enough to label it as a 'gay movie' (and restrict its distribution to the gay subculture), go ahead!

The form. Nobody has commented so far on the brilliant form. Watching the movie is like listening to a fugue by J. S. Bach. It is light and beautiful, entertaining and touching, but when you start to concentrate on the form you will get more and more excited about how clever it has been put together.

We see the martyr of St. Sebastian. No, not what happened really to Sebastian, we see the legend of the Catholic Church. No, we rather see a play about it written by an eccentric priest in 1914. Or rather the play as it had been rehearsed in a Canadian school. No, the play as it is memorized by one of the participants, 40 years later. Or rather a play performed by prisoners who do their best to bring those memories on the improvised stage. Then it blends into the thoughts of another one of the participants, 40 years ago, who in the meantime has become a bishop. And then we see the feelings about it all on the bishop's face.

These layers continuously melt into each other in a very artistic way. Sometimes you are in the Bishop's brain, sometime in a Canadian hotel of 1914, sometimes in a prison in 1954.

31. An excellent film experience



Author: Leon Fairley from Sacramento, CA

25 February 1999

The cinematography work in this movie is second rate to no film of any length or cost. I found this film so beautiful that I was on the edge of my seat all three times I saw it (in one week). The film is of a play performed in a Canadian prison to force a confession from a visitor and to achieve retribution for an innocent prisoner. It is a love story of the caliber of Romeo and Juliet with Danny Gilmore as the ethereal Vallier who falls in love with beautiful young tough Simon portrayed by Jason Cadieux. Their relationship is doomed by a young Bilodeau (Matthew Ferguson) who is himself madly in love with Simon and professes his love to Simon only to have

him laugh in his face. Bilodeau unable to accept that Simon has fallen for the 'Lily White' fairie acts rashly and decisively to end their relationship. So as not to spoil the film, know that Simon and Bilodeau are reunited as older adults who are forced to face the truth of their youth. The ending will not surprise you, but you will be impressed by the camera work and talents of these actors that are unknown in America. This film is highly recommended for homosexual audiences and film students.

32. Now for Something Completely Different



Author: [Roedy Green](#) from Victoria, BC. Canada

25 May 2007

This movie attempts to show the world through the eyes of young gay men in the early days of Quebec.

The movie is confusing, shown through flashbacks with men playing the parts of women. I puzzled with the director would do something so strange. I decided it was to make the straight people in the audience see the female characters closer to the way gays see them, without any sexual appeal. Their flirtations are nauseating but the "women" are unaware of how unappealing they are.

It is an honest film. It is about the intense emotional attachments of young gay men, something usually denied in depictions of gays.

The film disturbed me, making me ache to relive the days of my own passionate youth.

It is a film about being foolish, obeying what you are told rather than what your heart commands you to do.

33. Beautiful

Author: [ununiliac642 \(ununiliac642@hotmail.com\)](#) from Toronto, Canada

4 November 2004

A very well-put together movie. The sort that feels complete and well-told after you watch it.

Everything I would expect from such a movie: dramatic, tragic, and sexy. Definitely worth seeing.

Someone commented that it was confusing . . . I found it a bit confusing, but I understood it all at the end. If I'd been paying a bit less attention, I can see how it would have been bad that way. But I think this movie is worth paying attention to see; the story is told in a very unique way.

Or maybe I just haven't seen enough clever movies, making me really like this one.

34. Excellent!



Author: [juhakylmala \(juhakylmala@hotmail.com\)](mailto:juhakylmala@hotmail.com) from Hamina, Finland
1 February 2004

This movie is absolutely my favorite, it moves my soul so much that i can't even describe it . . . I was so astonished about this because i never believed that anyone could do movie like this. It was so touching , even i've seen Lilies 20 times it make me cry every time.

35. Brilliant! Why can't more gay films be like this?



Author: [Avi](#) from Los Angeles
20 March 2003

The worst thing about this film was the marketing and distribution, which let this gem fall off the radar before anyone knew it was out. Here was finally a film that had depth, imagination and innovative story-telling instead of scantily-clad bucks mincing muscle with bad acting. Few films from the gay community have found this level of quality in production values as well as story. True, there were some flaws in the make-up that I won't mention in the interest of not spoiling the film. But if you have not seen this film, rent it and let your imagination be rewarded.

36. faithful to the play and beautiful, even with some odd parts



Author: [Ani \(ani_saguine\)](#) from Vancouver, Canada
3 February 2003

When I first heard my friend tell me that the fourth play my seminar class had been made into a movie, a good movie and a Canadian one at that, I decided that this would be a must-see. After much effort I was able to borrow the movie from the Library, and was ready to throw a fit if it wasn't as good as the play script. It was.

Granted, there are some deviations, but on the whole, this is a beautifully made movie with wonderful scenery and effects. I especially liked the additions made to the stage play. It made the whole story that much more understandable, although the prisoners' reactions were a bit odd. The scene changes were smoothly done and had meaning in and of themselves. It also explained some of the things in the play that I had to wonder about, such as, just how does Simon get Bishop Bilodeau captured anyways?

I did NOT like Matthew Ferguson as Bilodeau. He was a little too weird here for my taste, but I suppose his effect in the role has been ruined by his turn as Birkoff in La Femme Nikita. There are also awkward moments when the acting is as bad as Lord of the Rings, but some of them are forgivable. Jason Cadieux is amazingly good as the very beautiful Simon, he's even good at acting badly, and Danny Gilmore is great as the delicate Vallier. Neither of these actors flinch at their roles. Lilies has definitely made me a fan of these two.

All in all, Lilies is exceptionally good for a Canadian film made with young actors in leading roles, especially since all of those actors are relatively unknown and new to movies. I would have preferred the movie to have been done in French, the original language for the play, and use subs, but nothing is perfect. I would see this movie anytime.

37. Pretentious and embarrassing



Author: [dcannon](#) from New York City
7 February 2007

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

I have a high tolerance for "serious" gay films, but this one is unforgivable. The story is preposterous; are we really expected to believe that a bishop could be held captive in a prison confessional and forced to watch a play that re-enacts a crucial event in his boyhood? The decision to have the women's roles played by men is just plain ridiculous. And the way it milks the cliché that love between men must always end in death and betrayal does nothing to advance gay cinema. The two boys, however, are quite pretty. But the actor playing the adult Simon bears no resemblance to the young Simon. As a boy, Simon has a peachy, creamy complexion; as an adult, he bears the obvious signs of severe acne. This is just one of many implausibilities in this deeply silly film.

38. The play may be the thing

Author: [B24](#) from Arizona
17 September 2004

. . .but will it play in the Vatican? I don't think so.

Many of the priests I know personally have similar stories to tell in private, but public disclosure remains a faint hope. I suspect this movie based on a play based on either a rich imagination or some plausible set of facts raises eyebrows as well as ire in certain quarters. At any rate, it is patently theatrical and therefore inaccessible to those who are immune to art.

As others have commented freely, the play within a play concept is an old warhorse, subject to

staginess and other sundry klinkers. For my part, I was reminded not only of Shakespeare but also (purely coincidental) a movie I remember well from 1971 called Fortune and Men's Eyes. I believe it was also filmed in a prison in Quebec. Funny how details such as that network through one's brain.

I liked some but not all of the acting in this one. Its chief attributes are the camera, the sets, and the music. Like many art films, it probably requires a second viewing to reveal all the nuances. I score it high for concept.

Mainly, though, I believe the viewer needs to bring a little background in social and intellectual history to this one. An overview of the St. Sebastian story together with various interpretations of it through the ages is necessary. I would as well recommend links to classic plays generally either in content or form as an aid to interpretation.

39. Awful in so many different ways . . .



Author: [bijou-2](#) from London, England
9 April 2006

This is the sort of pretentious crap that has killed art-house cinema. The fact that the players speak English makes it more criminal to hear dialogue that appears to have been written in French and then sloppily translated. The actors speak like they are reading bad subtitles and are therefore forced to speak some very idiotic sentences indeed.

The young actors are pretty but surprisingly sexless. They come across like twelve year old girls, not mature enough to pretend they have any of these feelings. This is stressed even more by the casting of older men in female roles, at once an insult to women and to gay men.

Any film in soft focus is considered "beautiful" today and this one is particularly ugly with fantastic scenery badly photographed and endless shots of lakes and cottages that add nothing to the setting. The prison scenes are strictly 1960's bad theater of the absurd.

This play on film presents a convoluted jilted lover plot worthy of a daytime soap pretending it is saying something important about homophobia. Indeed who is the true villain here? The jealous lover who killed for his love and became a priest in his atonement or the selfish and closeted Simone, who was dumping his true love after one beating from dad. It is Simone who is the sinner here but the writer would rather not see that and blames some smitten waiter for all the crimes of humanity. Apparently Simone paid for his real sins by ageing really badly, a punishment only a gay man would understand.

Even with it's drag queen women and naked girly-boys, LILIES is not good gay cinema. But it sure is queer.

40. Exercise in voyeurism

Author: [totojuice \(totojuice@yahoo.com\)](mailto:totojuice@yahoo.com) from New York, NY
30 December 1999

This was no more than an exercise in voyeurism. The story was secondary. Okay, this film was pretty to watch. That is if you enjoy seeing 20 year old guys kissing each other and taking off their clothes. Which really is all this film is about. The "complex story" of a secret and a priest was a clever idea. But it ends there, with a clever idea than never really develops. If you can get past the feeling that "this would never happen" you may enjoy some of the scenery (no pun intended).

41. Confused.



Author: [Hunky Stud](#)

21 March 2001

This movie has to be seen twice in order to understand it. Then the story line is not worth to be seen twice.

it was based on a play. The movie itself feels like another updated play. Viewers will get confused without all the explanations.

It is a confusing movie because the viewer was not advised about why there were males who act as females. for example, it is definitely not clear for why a male who dressed in woman's clothes was called "mother." And why there were sudden changes of the surroundings.

A play is mere a play, but for a movie, it should not be a mere play.

The story is sentimental, but the movie failed to portrait in a deep level.

42. The Cake Fell



Author: [harry-76](#) from Cleveland, Ohio

20 July 2000

There's some flavor left, but the texture's gone flat. Kept in the oven too long, it's now tough and chewy instead of buoyant and supple. A bit of Genet-inspired writing in a quasi "Marat/Sade"-type setting, this enactment has its ups and downs, but decidedly the downs win out. Possibly a good idea at some point, by completion time the bloom is gone, leaving long stretches of uneven and incoherent footage inducing alternating apathy and tedium.

43. Gorgeous-looking, but fairly silly at the same time.



Author: [Joe \(deftoner44@aol.com\)](mailto:deftoner44@aol.com) from St. Louis

18 September 1999

Since I am quite unfamiliar with the likes of gay cinema (with the exception of gloss-camp indie director Gregg Araki), I have this friend who recommended to me "Lilies," a Canadian film about a relationship between a teenage boy and another teen boy who happens to be the "stud-type". The two young actors who star are both good, but "Lilies" is flawed majorly. If you don't know already, there are no females in the cast, but that's not to say there aren't any female characters. They have male actors playing the females, which is sometimes a bit laughable. The two characters that bugged the hell out of me were the French mademoiselle and the young boy's mother. They actors playing them act like they are in some John Waters film of some sort. The French "woman" tries to be so proper, but comes off utterly obnoxious. Thank God for the two boys. Without their presence, this may have played like cheap camp. (Oh, by the way, even though he starred in one of my favorite films of all time "Love and Human Remains", do not cast hideous-actor Matthew Ferguson in a film EVER again!)

Beautiful, romantic (in a way), but often times corny. Three stars out of Four.

Was the above review useful to you?

Appendix C

Marion Bridge User Reviews from the IMDb.com

16 User Reviews in Total

1. Subtle, beautiful indie movie



Author: Brigid O Sullivan (wisewebwoman) from Toronto, Canada

23 May 2004

A sign of a good movie? When you just don't want it to be over, you do not want to leave the characters.

This is such a movie, flawless performances by all, without exception. It draws you slowly into the secrets at its depth, without mawkishness or a hammering of two by fours. The relationship between the sisters feels real. No black and white, a lot of grey but underneath it all a terrible understanding, unspoken and fearful.

All unfolds as it should. I was pleased to see the writer was Daniel MacIvor who also wrote another subtle, gentle movie called "The Five Senses." You are uncertain where it is taking you for a while and then the devastating truth you begin to guess at unfolds.

The story is revealed more in looks and glances than in specific dialogue. More than anything it is a story about coming home and making peace with the devils you have tried to leave there but are haunting you everywhere anyway.

2. Three Sisters in Nova Scotia



Author: Frank van Dijl from Rotterdam, Netherlands

29 January 2003

Marion Bridge was one of 14 films nominated for the Tiger Awards of the International Film Festival Rotterdam 2003 and I wouldn't be at all surprised to see this film win. I have deep respect for the actresses who play the three sisters Agnes, Theresa and Louise, especially for Molly Parker (Agnes aka Angie). Mother is dying in the remote village in Nova Scotia where the sisters spent their youth. Agnes, who has an alcohol problem (inherited from her mother, as it seems), returns from Toronto just to find nothing has really changed. There is the usual bickering with her sisters, the woman next door is as nosy as ever and the people getting drunk in the local bar seem to have never left the building. A notion of suspense is triggered as Agnes

repeatedly parks the family car in front of a souvenir shop. There she sits and watches the young girl Joanie who lives there. As the drama slowly develops questions are answered and new questions launched, even after the plot is unveiled. I won't give it away here, but I can assure it is quite shocking. The three sisters are very well cast as is their mother. The father who lives with another woman is an old sod who doesn't seem to remember (or care) what has happened in the past. Marion Bridge ends with an optimistic scene which is as moving as the film as a whole. A noteworthy achievement by young director Wiebke von Carolsfeld.

3. Powerful Family Drama



Author: [Chlotrudis](#) from Boston, MA
27 September 2002

Daniel Mclvor (THE FIVE SENSES; BEEFCAKE) has written an extraordinary family drama involving three sisters trying to deal with their dying mother and the shared secrets of their past. Surely a recipe for mawkish, formula family drama, MARION BRIDGE succeeds wonderfully thanks to Mclvor's sharp, funny screenplay, strong performances by Parker, Jenkins, Smith and youngster Ellen Page, and an assured directorial hand by first-timer von Carolsfeld. BRIDGE is filled with laugh-out-loud humor and powerful emotion as Parker's middle sister Agnes returns to her rural, Cape Breton hometown after living wild in Toronto. Her two sister Theresa and Louise view her return skeptically, but Agnes insists she's given up the booze and drugs she once played heavily with, and takes charge of their mother's care. Yet as in any family drama, those secrets preferred left undiscussed rear their ugly head. The sweeping Nova Scotia landscape echoes the arc of emotions of this troubled family dredged once more to the surface. A stand out film.

4. If you liked "you can count on me" . . .



Author: [scheesma](#) from Toronto, Canada
17 May 2003

Marion Bridge is a remarkable film. The movie's story elements would be at home in a typical movie of the week, and without the remarkable skill and restraint shown by its first-time director, the narrative could have very easily degenerated into weepy melodrama or gross caricature. But instead, the film's tone, pacing and subtle performances allow Marion Bridge to draw its strength from the real drama and humour found in everyday choices, characters and settings; as compromised and complex as life lived.

Also worth noting: the excellent sound track – especially the opening and closing instrumental pieces, and the surprising talents of Ellen Page.

5. This is a subtle and beautiful film. Molly Parker's breakthrough role as a lead actress.



Author: [pogueelvis](#) from New York

7 April 2003

Everything about Marion Bridge is subtle and beautiful. The script is spot-on about three sisters and I found myself enjoying how well the ensemble cast worked together. Unlike hollywood films, where the theme is usually beaten over your head, the movie speaks volumes in its silences and expressions. Molly Parker also proves that she can be a strong leading actress. I am excited about seeing her again.

6. A must see for anyone who still cares about a good story . . .



Author: [Marc A. Leckstein \(mleckstein@monmouth.com\)](#) from Sea Bright, New Jersey

13 April 2003

As someone who loves the theatre but is tired of seeing the same material recycled again and again, it is refreshing to know that independent film still exists. Marion Bridge is such a breathe of fresh air. Its the type of picture which reassures you that there are still filmmakers out there who care about the story they are telling rather than just looking for a vehicle to demonstrate the newest special effect.

This film was absolutely wonderful. The others who have commented here have already given a synopsis, so I won't go into those details. I simply wanted to add my name to those who have praised Wiebke von Carolsfeld's feature length directorial debut.

Ms. Carolsfeld has taken a powerful story written by Daniel Maclvor and transfered it to film in a fashion that will touch you on many levels. I assure you that you won't forget about this movie or its performers (Molly Parker, Rebecca Jenkins, Stacy Smith and Marguerite McNeil are all outstanding) anytime soon.

I will continue to look for future endeavors by all of the participants in this project. They have a new fan today; one who hopes that there is plenty more material to come.

7. Not a chick flick



Author: [grant1971 \(grant1971@hotmail.com\)](#) from Tucson, AZ

5 April 2003

This film is labeled as 'Genre: Drama, Female'. It's NOT! When I think of female dramas or 'chick flicks' I think of the typical "woman making it (or not) in man's world" (Steel Magnolias, Thelma and Louise) or sappy overly emotional Cinderella story (Never Been Kissed and about a thousand others I can't think of now). This is not one of those. This is a drama. An excellent drama that, coincidentally, has a primarily female cast.

I just saw "Marion Bridge" at the Arizona International Film Festival. What a great movie! Well balanced with characters you can feel. It is about siblings and the LOVE/hate relationships between. It's a strong truthful script without the over the top soapbox agenda so common to independent films. The cast draws you in completely. If you have a sibling, watch this movie. If not then. watch this movie!

Oh, and Molly Parker. Wow!

8. Spectacular Film



Author: [MurFilms](#) from Los Angeles, CA

11 April 2003

I recently saw this film at its premiere in Los Angeles. This was by far one of the best independent films that I have seen in a long time. The script was powerful and emotional without being too preachy. The acting was flawless including the performances by Molly Parker, Rebecca Jenkins and even the young Ellen Page.

The directing and cinematography was exceptional. This is a deep film involving the lives of 3 very interesting sisters and their bond that will never break. Go see this film!

9. Intelligent, character-driven drama – with a kick like a mule.



Author: [tigerfish50](#) from Old London, New England

10 December 2010

The opening moments of 'Marion Bridge' reveal several clever touches which sketch in the details of the film's two principal characters, as thirty-something Agnes waits for her sister Theresa at a Nova Scotia airport bar after arriving from Toronto. First Agnes decides against lighting a cigarette after catching sight of a security guard authority figure – and later, after Theresa appears, declines to finish her drink as the sisters greet each other with noticeable coolness. When Theresa comments tartly on the large size of her sister's suitcase, and Agnes responds with some defensive justifications, Theresa then laboriously hefts the oversize case through the airport while spurning to use its wheels.

The insight into prickly family dynamics provided by this early sequence sets the nuanced tone for the remainder of "Marion Bridge". On arrival at the family home, where a third sister also resides, the reason for Agnes' homecoming is soon apparent: her mother is dying of cancer at the local hospital. Over the course of the film, the hidden narrative of the three sisters' family history is gradually illuminated by an intelligent and sensitive script that appears to have inspired exceptional performances from both cast and crew. The mystery of 'Marion Bridge' unfolds without theatrics, until it arrives at an ending that is as elegantly understated as the introductory passage – except that it has the impact of a punch to the gut. 'Marion Bridge' is a rare gem – to say any more could spoil the effect, and that would truly be a shame.

10. Good acting in a slow burn movie



Author: [SnoopyStyle](#)

20 February 2014

Agnes (Molly Parker) has come home to Sydney, Nova Scotia to see her hospitalized mother (Marguerite McNeil). She moves in with her sisters Theresa (Rebecca Jenkins) and Louise (Stacy Smith) who are still living at home. She is 65 days sober, but their mother never quit. They move their mother home. The women grate on each other. Agnes starts to stalk Joanie (Ellen Page) who is connected to her past somehow.

The movie is a low-key affair. The energy, the direction is a slow burn. The great actresses hint at a deeper story, and it's revealed slowly. Molly Parker and Rebecca Jenkins are especially terrific as sisters with unresolved issues. Marguerite McNeil is memorable as the alcoholic mother. The family secrets rattle around their relationships unspoken and untouched. It's a fascinating little movie.

11. Pre-"Deadwood" Molly Parker and pre-"Juno" Ellen Page in a first-rate film from Canada



Author: [The_late_Buddy_Ryan](#) from UWS, NYC, USA

15 November 2014

Excellent family drama from '02. Starts out like a typically rambling indie film but quickly becomes quite involving and suspenseful; I'm sorry that I found out a little too much about the plot beforehand from reading capsule reviews. Daniel MacIvor's script for "Wilby Wonderful" was overstuffed and chaotic, but here he gives you just enough information to get on with, so you're eager to sift for clues in the sometimes cryptic dialogue of the three main characters. "Marion Bridge" certainly deals with serious themes, but it's not at all gloomy or depressing. On the contrary, MacIvor shows his characters coming to terms with an unpunished crime that's been oppressing them for half their lives; comparisons with Mike Leigh's "Secrets & Lies," the

highest praise IMHO, are certainly warranted. Molly Parker is a wonderfully expressive actress, and it's great to see her in a leading role. The Nova Scotia locale is pretty interesting in itself—the music, the accent, the landscape; seems a little like a maritime version of Appalachia. A lot of viewers will head for the exits when they hear words like "subtle," "naturalistic" and "prizewinning Canadian drama," but I know you're better than that . . . Available on disk from Netflix.

12. So subtle I'm still puzzled



Author: (gnostic21@hotmail.com) from New York, USA

18 March 2009

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

I rented the DVD of this movie because indie movies, and 'fringe of empire' movies (Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, sometimes British) are not corrupted by the demands of Hollywood blockbuster profitability. And because it had Molly Parker and early Ellen Page. The crucial element of this movie, that 'Agnes' had borne an illegitimate child due to parental incest was so subtle that I had trouble understanding it – it passed by in a confession so low-keyed and fast that I'm not sure I heard it. It is mentioned only in coded fashion in IMDb reviews. I'm in the process of watching the director commentary, hoping that it will be revealed more openly. I don't understand why the secrecy, unless it has to do with the movie's potential for international distribution. Also the possible lesbian interest of one of the sisters. They give mystery to the plot that seem to be unnecessary, unless the religious component of the sister's lives is a defining element. Parental incest / lesbianism are NOT rare shocking phenomena. The movie was interesting as a historical artifact. Molly Parker and Ellen Page were great nevertheless.

13. Wonderful!



Author: [HALIFA_ le_X](#) from Halifax, NS

28 December 2002

A true gem, this masterpiece by Viebke von Carolfield is a movie that the whole family can enjoy. It can be comedic and sad, dramatic and elegant. Ellen Page shines amidst a cast of experienced veterans such as Molly Parker, and Joseph Rutten is terrific in a minor role FIVE STARS!

14. a rather mediocre "actorly" piece . . .



Author: [Vanessa Peeters](#) from London

26 July 2003

A rather mediocre "actorly" piece that essentially rolls over you like a Lifetime Network made-for-Cable movie. Nothing is glaringly awful, and yet there is a bland, precious quality about the work that suggests the undue influence of Chekhov, or a Candian-cum-Bergman homage.

15. **Marion Bridge on Reel 13**

Author: [eplromeo8](#) from United States

17 October 2008

The Canadian invasion continues on Reel 13 with yet another Canuck indie. This one is written by the same writer (Daniel MacIvor) as the worst Reel 13 film of all – WILBY WONDERFUL. Fortunately for us, they got a different director for this film (Wiebke von Carolsfeld), but he (or she, I suppose) doesn't seem to help much. On the whole, the direction is overly theatrical and uninspired. Where WILBY WONDERFUL was contrived and had a silly sitcom vibe about it, MARION BRIDGE is bleak, melodramatic, mostly lifeless, painfully slow and very, very dull.

The story of MARION BRIDGE, as based on MacIvor's own play, is centered around three sisters (it is my feeling that the connection to Chekhov is no accident) who reunite over the impending death of their mother. Each sister has their own issue: one is a recovering drug/alcohol abuser, the other is an overly maternal, rigid middle-aged woman recently out of a long relationship and the third is a lazy, closeted lesbian. One thing I'll say for Marion Bridge is that its characters are all well-defined, but the actresses' interpretations of these characters have varied results.

I'm sorry to say that Rebecca Jenkins is back as the eldest, uptight sister. She proves that her annoyingness in WILBY WONDERFUL was not a fluke. She was grating then, she is grating here and at no point do I believe any emotion she is trying to portray. She is the perfect example of a surface actress – nothing going on underneath. She says the words, but does not play the role with her whole self. Molly Parker fares a little better with the recovering drug abuser sister. She is pretty and mostly likable, but she forces the character's weaker moments. And honestly, at no point do I really get a sense of the character's dark past nor do I ever believe that the character presented by Parker ever really did drugs and alcohol. Stacy Smith, with her limited screen time, actually gives the most complete performance of the sisters as the lazy lesbian. She's believable and interesting – it's almost sad that she is the forgotten sister by the playwright and director. It should come as no surprise, however, that the best performance in the whole film belongs to Ellen Page, in a supporting role, as a random girl that the sisters almost seem to stalk. For those of you who think Juno might have been an accident, MARION BRIDGE (and HARD CANDY) is here to tell you that she is the real deal.

MARION BRIDGE fails to capture the attention of the audience early on and never really finds any burst of energy after that. The pain within the film is real, but it fails to be very engaging or

interesting (It doesn't help that the video transfer seemed faded – the color palette seemed very bleak and muted). Furthermore, the revelation of the film's very dark secret was extremely anti-climactic. It could have been a very interesting twist in the film (it was in CHINATOWN), but here, it's very ho-hum. The result is I didn't really care – about the characters or their predicament. With that said, however, there is a moment at the very end of the film where the title song finally comes in (apparently it's a famous Canadian tune) and the director offers us a nice surprise in a wide shot that actually brought tears even to these cold, unfeeling eyes. Sadly, one good moment does not a film make and MARION BRIDGE failed to take full advantage of its potential, which is always a shame.

16. What a stinker!

Author: steele-12

29 April 2003

I went to this movie partly based upon the favourable reviews on the IMDb and partly on the fact that it was filmed in Nova Scotia. Shortly after the opening scenes I began to think I had made a bad choice. A number of times I was tempted to get up and leave (and I rarely walk out of a movie), but decided there must be something redeeming about it. The ending is poignant but did little to take away the bad taste that I had accumulated. It portrays Cape Breton as a gray and ugly landscape whose citizens are intent on achieving early death from lung cancer and emphysema. The music is good after a shaky beginning. However, the lovely song, "Down on the Mira" has now been tainted by association with this movie.

This film may best be characterized as GRUNGE and DOWNLIFTING pretending to be art. I would seriously question any film festival that would award prizes to this bit of misanthropy.

Was the above review useful to you?

Appendix D

My Winnipeg User Reviews from the IMDb.com

30 User Reviews in Total

1. In some ways great and haunting, but too much about hockey

tomrumbouts30 May 2019

Warning: Spoilers

I have seen this three times now, and I describe it to people as a "surreal documentary". I do not want to "spoil" too much, but the mostly black and white imagery, and somewhat melancholy music, and some of the material had an effect on me, in part because I also lost a brother some years ago and grew up in northern Michigan with frequently cold weather. My only complaint, and it is kind of minor, is that I think the maybe ten minutes or so dealing with this history of hockey in Winnipeg is the weakest material in the film. Regardless, I am glad I stumbled across this unique film.

2. what felt like a moving picture of diary of nostalgia

kiichi_mirabella15 September 2018

This film probably had no real budget to speak of and if you are really paying attention, you would notice that it's actually mostly old footage of one man's home town. What's quite magical about this film is that, you really wouldn't notice if you weren't paying attention. Instead, you would be swept up in the amusing narration of a prodigal son returning home. And if you grew up in a small town where nothing much happened, as I did, you could relate to the nostalgic elusions to the monuments, people and staples of the town. Note worthy scenes within the film are Winnipeg's very own sitcom *Ledge Man*. About a down and out man who every episode, attempts to throw himself off a ledge only to be talked down by a local hero. A truly mesmerising watch and a very intimate look into one man's feelings of his home town

3. An Outstanding Cinematic Accomplishment

popcorninhell16 June 2016

My Winnipeg is a pseudo-documentary/essay film/work of elaborate fiction that is arguably the best depiction of a person's complicated relationship with their birthplace ever committed to celluloid. In it director Guy Maddin mythologizes the city he's called home his whole life with surrealist tall-tales of Winnipeg's old hockey arena, the 1919 general strike and a rivalry between two warring taxi cab companies. At the center of it is Maddin (Fehr) who walks like a somnambulist through his snow-covered hamlet, interacting with actors who are hired to reenact half-remembered childhood traumas, most of which concern his shrewish mother (Savage).

Somewhere between a waking dream and a Freudian melodrama, the amateurish reenactments only adds to the atmosphere, which conjures comparisons to early David Lynch. Always the neo-constructionist, Maddin employs a sloe of old-school effects and technical wizardry that enhances the experience. It has been said that Maddin's films always have the feeling of seeing pre-code talkies from another, warped dimension. A dimension where people of the thirties would accept fluid sexuality, incest and gore in their films. Granted while *My Winnipeg* sacrifices the gleefully salacious themes of *Careful* (1992) and the grotesqueness of *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988) the film stands as the director's most personal work. The same themes do remain but only on the fringes, subtly weaved into a complex tapestry of nostalgia and surreal flights of fancy.

Those seeing *My Winnipeg* for the first time may catch themselves wondering if the myriad of tall-tales are true. So many claims skate the edge between amusing peculiarity and improbable absurdity that it's hard to ferret out what's real and what's a product of docu-fantasia. While I can sympathize, asking such questions is comparable to asking how many angels you can fit on a match head. It's better to let the film wash over you and be regaled by stories of frozen horse heads, treasure hunts, aboriginal origin stories and other "facts" about the heart of the heart of the continent. That and be taken in by the crisp black and white cinematography that only adds to the city's macabre charm.

Maddin states via narration that he must escape Winnipeg. "I must leave it now, but how to escape one's city?" Many people ask themselves that same question before taking that fateful step to (hopefully) greener pastures and opportunity aplenty. Even if you're the type of person who yearns to leave their small town, it seems, at least according to director Guy Maddin, that you can't really escape the smothering embrace of a world exaggerated in your own mind. Whether all is true or none of it is, *My Winnipeg* still remains an exemplary portrait of the Canadian "The Gateway to the West".

4. Winnipeg: The Heart of the Heart



Author: [gavin6942](#) from United States

14 March 2015

Fact, fantasy and memory are woven seamlessly together in this portrait of film-maker Guy Maddin's home town of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The New York Times wrote that the film "skates along an icy edge between dreams and lucidity, fact and fiction, cinema and psychotherapy." Ebert wrote, "If you love movies in the very sinews of your imagination, you should experience the work of Guy Maddin." He is so right. The first Maddin I saw was "The Heart of the World" and I was hooked by his eye, making the new look old and the old look new.

With this film, I wish I had been there (Winnipeg) to fully understand it. Maddin added a combination of poetry and "Christmas Story"-style narrative to give us the lowdown on a place that is always sleepy, always winter. (Being from Wisconsin, I can understand . . . at least to a point, as it is still almost 700 miles northwest of here. Those in Fargo probably understand better.)

5. The Vidiot Reviews . . .



Author: [capone666](#) from Canada

25 August 2014

My Winnipeg

When holding a mirror up to your hometown it's important to do it from far, far away.

The raconteur of this mockumentary, however, cannot escape his birthplace.

Guy Maddin (Darcy Fehr) hopes recounting his childhood in Winnipeg will free him from its magnetic pull.

From the underground confluence beneath the Forks, to the secondary roadways running through the back lanes of the West End, the narrator (Guy Maddin) draws comparisons to his overbearing mother (Ann Savage).

His revelry for séance's at the Legislative building and roaming sleepwalkers is revealed only by his dismay over losing the local hockey team, and the herd of racehorses frozen in the Red River.

Sometimes factual, most often fictional, surrealist filmmaker Guy Maddin forgoes the snowscape stereotype, instead using his abstract black and white style to enhance the city's inexplicable allure.

Incidentally that murky quality to the cityscape is a result of fogging for mosquitoes.

Green Light

vidiotreviews.blogspot.ca

6. Engaging and charming flights of fancy posing as a documentary

Author: [bob the moo](#) from United Kingdom

18 December 2012

It has been a few years since I had a binge on Guy Maddin films. I think I heard of him around the time he did *Dracula* and then I made an effort to catch his short films at festivals etc. I knew for some time that he had made several films since the last time I watched his work but it took me a while to get around to them. This film was my starting point to catch up a little and it seemed to be a good choice as it mixes humor with tragedy, words with images and truth with complete fiction. The film sees Maddin traveling back to his hometown on Winnipeg on the train, lost in a dream state of memory and commentary.

The film presents itself as a documentary and indeed there are some facts in there if you look (and with some stories you will go online afterwards to check if they are real or not) but mostly this is one flight of fancy where nuggets of personal and town history are expanded and exaggerated to create a world much more interesting than it would have been. The presentation of it though suggests no such thing and there is never the suggestion that it is done as a mockumentary or as a joke, it keeps a genuineness about it throughout that is engaging and charming. Maddin narrates the film and sounds a little like the calm presence that Michael Moore used to be in his film; his presence is welcome because it reminds us that under everything is that core of truth, whether it be in the family recollections or the actual history of the town. The lines are blurred constantly though but this is part of the film's appeal – it is a fantasy and it is really fun to go with it and believe it while it is being told.

The scenes recreating scenes from his childhood are good but the tales of the wider town are much more fun – tales of a dark network of streets, of lovers visiting the frozen horse heads after a local tragedy etc, they have real color and vividness to the words that it is almost cruel to find they are mostly only true in the smallest detail. Maddin's visual style helps because you can never be sure what is stock footage and what is not, and the imagination in the visuals match the flights of the words themselves. As always it is not the

most accessible of films and some might be annoyed by its lack of facts, but fans will enjoy it a lot because it is another great visual and imaginative feast from Maddin.

3. For the Black Tuesdays



Author: [oOgiandujaOo](#) from United Kingdom

25 July 2008

Wittgenstein once observed, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent". It should follow on from this wearied maxim that all true art is destined to be personal. Such a truth is evident when watching Guy Maddin's "My Winnipeg". Apparently inspired by the film he shot of Isabella Rossellini remembering her father, "My Dad Is 100 Years Old" (2005) (a documentary of memories – a hyper-documentary? – rather than realities), with "My Winnipeg" Maddin cine-alchemically recreates the patchwork quilt of his life and history of his city, indelibly stained with Winnipegian fluids and woven with Manitoban heart-fibres.

Influences become clear as never before, Maddin's ambisexuality is on display (1995s Sissy Slap Boy Party now makes sense), "La Roue" (1923/Abel Gance) is revealed as his cinematic touchstone (following on from the quotation in "Odilon Redon – or The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity", also 1995). The movie is almost like a coming out, a cry of freedom, a love letter to all he holds dear, ice hockey, Winnipeg, silent cinema, sexuality, proletarian utopias, family memories. It reminded me of the words of a Portugese man on TV when describing the Carnation Revolution of 1974, where armed forces were conquered by ordinary people wielding carnations, he called it a "giant national orgasm". "My Winnipeg" is Guy Maddin's heart nailed to the screen, as fiercely courageous a movie as you will ever see.

There are blue truths in the film, we're not spared his mother's genitalia or fever dreams of childhood sexuality. Here are some quotations from interviews Maddin gave for this film just so you know what you will be seeing:

"Children are sexual beings, just think of your own childhood. In my case, I was far more sexual as a child than I am now"

"Nothing bothers me more than a movie about the innocence of children! What are they innocent of? They might be innocent of murder, but that's about it! Children haven't learned to repress yet or anything like that. They're just teeming with wonderful luridity, from very early on!"

There is something universal about the film, Maddin incants a litany of opprobrium and indignity that the city of Winnipeg has suffered, from the demolition of an iconic department store, to the closure of two underground swimming pools and the hockey stadia. Modern history is written in the rictus of the agonised city exposed to modernity. Many cities have

undergone such outrages, my own city lost it's old centre to Nazi bombing, a fragile heart torn out.

The swimming pools of Maddin's memories are lustful pits, at street level families swim, down one tier the girl's practice mouth to mouth resuscitation on one another, and on the bottom level the boys cavort naked in the changing rooms.

The film transcends documentary, even fantastical documentary into mysticism. Maddin uses the imagery of horses, as have many great artists from Raphael, to Gericault, to Marc, to Parajanov. We see Golden Boy parades, a Masonic town hall, and the two forks under the forks, the mysterious underground rivers that feed the mons veneris on which Winnipeg nestles.

My personal favourite scene was Lorette Avenue where we are show a "hermaphrodite" street where on one side the street has houses facing front, and on the other side the backs of houses. No-one talks about Lorette Avenue... (Previously Maddin had made distinctions between alleys where the backs of houses only can be scene, and streets where we only see the fronts of houses).

I won't spoil the ending for you, you have yet to see the wonder of Citizen Girl! Do not waver or hesitate, make ye to the cinema! Maddin has now taken the step from being a beloved cult director, to being a great auteur. Vive le Cinema! Vive la Résistance Culturelle!

4. Funny enough to make Winnipeg seem charming



Author: [death-hilarious](#) from Canada

11 September 2007

Guy Maddin described My Winnipeg as 'docutasia' and that's probably more accurate than any other description I could give of it. The film is a very personal, light-hearted, but informative, look at Winnipeg through the eyes of her native son Guy Maddin. The film is shot in black and white, combining stock archival footage (including private home videos) with some new freshly shot material. The film follows a young Guy Maddin (played by Darcy Fehr) on a train trying to escape from 'sleepy, snowing, Winnipeg' and its mystic pull. To affect his escape Maddin must, through the course of the film, come to terms with everything that binds him to the city (family, home, community, and history). Held together by the barest narrative thread, the film is most like Berlin: Symphony of a Great City, though being Canadian it's much funnier and self-deprecating. The film is narrated by Guy Maddin himself, and despite the fact that he seemed to have many reservations about using his own voice, he does a great job (ranging from the fiery sermon of charged propagandist to the soft relaxing repetition of an experienced hypnotist). Made for the documentary channel, with a TV audience in mind, the film is

accessible enough for anyone and funny enough to make even Winnipeg charming. While I don't know if it's feature film material, definitely watch if you can catch it on the tube.

5. Just Fascinating

Author: [crossbow0106](#) from United States
23 June 2008

A tribute, kind of, to the great city of Winnipeg, Manitoba (I'm not being facetious—I've been there), this is an 80 minute documentary about the place. It accentuates the winter's bitter cold, the days gone by (some of the images are amazing) and what the city meant and means to Mr. Maddin. This film is not for everyone. It is in black and white and grainy. At first, I wasn't sure if this was a mockumentary, but even though the narrator laments the passing of people and places, I was wondering if the whole point was to explain why people don't leave. Sure, its no Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver (you get the idea), but its a medium size city that thrives. I have seen Mr. Maddin's "Saddest Music In The World", so I know I was expecting something different. Maybe you have no interest in Winnipeg (or can even find it on a map!), but that doesn't detract from the narrative. An added bonus is Ann Savage playing the narrator's mother. Wow, she is in her mid 80's and she agreed to do this role. I don't expect mass agreement here, but if you were commissioned to do a film about your hometown, I'm not sure how different your film would be than this, especially if you life in a city thats cold in the winter. I'm waiting for "My Buffalo" or "My Fargo". For now, I'm quite content with this film that moved me and even taught me about the city. A great left of center cinematic achievement.

6. A haunting, humorous, and wholly wondrous dream of a documentary.



Author: [Hooper450](#) from London, Ontario
14 October 2008

You could say that Guy Maddin makes films for the dreamers.

No other filmmaker alive puts so much effort into chipping away at the audience's sense of logic and running them through a grinder of their own twisted subconscious.

Beginning with his feature debut Tales from the Gimli Hospital in 1988, Maddin has remained furiously independent, the closest he's ever come to mainstream success being 2003's The Saddest Music in the World, which acted as a kind-of holy grail for film buffs and those obsessed with the days of cinema past. My Winnipeg may be the purest distillation of his unique aesthetic vision to date, almost surely because it's paradoxically the most personal and fantastical.

In essence, the film is a love-letter to Maddin's hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba. It's a rueful love-letter though, because the film opens with the director hurriedly explaining that he needs to, has to leave forever. But he can't bring himself to do it. The solution? He'll hire actors to recreate scenes from his childhood, in a desperate attempt to attain some obscure kind of closure. In a fabulously inventive instance of casting, B-movie veteran Ann Savage (Edward G. Ulmer's *Detour*) plays his "real" mom playing herself.

Maddin augments the often hilarious film-within-a-film with bizarre "facts" about Winnipeg, like how it has the 10 times the sleepwalking rate of any other city or that Maddin himself was born in the locker room of the local hockey arena only to return three days later as a newborn to attend his first game. These half-truths attain a kind-of mythic status when combined with Maddin's haunting visuals that, like most of his filmography, harken back to the choppy, rapid-fire pace of German expressionism and the heart-on-sleeve emotion of '40s and '50s melodrama.

It shouldn't be surprising how funny *My Winnipeg* is, considering that Maddin might be the most unpretentious avant-garde filmmaker of all-time. His casual, matter-of-fact narration blends perfectly with the film's stark poetic images, making the many leaps of fancy that much more potent. When he describes a "secret" taxi company that operates only on Winnipeg's darkened back streets or ruminates on the beauty of "snow fossils" caused by plodding winter footsteps, it's downright impossible not to be overcome with feelings of deep nostalgia and wonder.

Maddin has made faux-biographical films before, 2006's *Brand Upon the Brain* the most notorious example, but with *My Winnipeg*, it feels like he's finally letting us in. Of course, it's just as likely that he's putting us on, and if he is, it's one of the most staggeringly beautiful con games ever committed to celluloid.

7. A Fever Dream



Author: [cashiersducinemart](#) from Riverview, MI

13 September 2007

A love poem to Canadian auteur Guy Maddin's soon-to-be-former home, *MY WINNIPEG* feels like a fever dream that brings together past, present, and future. Repeated words and phrases form a hypnotic cadence as Maddin's cinematic stand-in (Darcy Fehr) chugs through the snowy darkness. "Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Winnipeg," is the chant, rising and falling like the locomotive drone of the night train carrying its somnambulist fares through Manitoba's premiere city.

Winnipeg; heart of the heart of Canada, the place that raised Maddin. With a hockey arena for a father and a hair salon for a mother (for more hockey and hairdressing see Maddin's earlier

COWARD BENDS THE KNEE), Maddin explores the structural arteries of his home town and revisits the history of himself and his city. Narrated by the filmmaker, the prose of the film (courtesy of long-time Maddin crony George Toles) is an overwrought poem of maniacal hyperbole and enthusiastic linguistic gymnastics; a perfect pitch for the fractured visuals of Maddin's multimedia pastiche. Looking like a daguerreotype picture postcard of this snowbound wonderland, MY WINNIPEG typifies Maddin's mad genius and captures his sordid relationship with his home.

8. Love Me, Love My Winnipeg



Author: Chris Knipp from Berkeley, California

3 August 2008

Winnipeg is to Guy Maddin as Baltimore is to John Waters. It's very unfashionability is its inspiration. But where Waters dwells on hairspray and bouffant dresses and twisted vowels, Maddin describes Winnipeg as a place of perpetual snow, destroyed hockey rinks, and sleepwalkers. "Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Winnipeg . . ." he begins his incessant voice—over as the first of his typically distressed, nostalgic black and white images in square format appear showing long-ago men and women walking in snow-covered streets and a man dozing in a train car whose big window is like a movie screen showing figures and the big face of his mother. Sometimes blurry phrases flicker onto the screen echoing his words, like a refrain.

The man (Darcy Fehr) is meant to be himself, getting out of town. "I've got to leave it, I've got to leave it," he chants, and then speculates that maybe he can film his way out of Winnipeg, putting all his past on celluloid and thereby ridding himself of its fascination so he can move elsewhere.

For this poem and rant about his native city, which he says he wants to leave and can't, Maddin hired actors to play his mother and some of his siblings and borrowed his girlfriend's pug to stand in for the childhood chihuahua. He leased their old house and moved the old furniture (or facsimiles) into it, distributing a runner carpet and shabby couches in the living room and an old TV. His mother is played by veteran B-picture vixen Ann Savage. Black and white images of what purports to be his real family back in the Fifties flash on the screen alternating with their hired look-alikes as Maddin spins arcane anecdotes about his childhood and drops in the occasional fact. An old department store and a restaurant that served orange jello figure prominently, as does the dynamiting of a treasured tree and a hockey arena. If there is a logic to this quirky ramble, it's as *sui generis* as you can get.

We don't come away with a sense of Maddin's actual past, because all his anecdotes seem highly embroidered, like his mother's grabbing some friends' 75-year-old myna bird—which ran free in the house and had "a large vocabulary"—and smashing it to the floor because she

was afraid of birds. Or the family threatening their mother with a parakeet to make her get out of bed and cook them a meatloaf. Or the team of ancient hockey stars, all suited up, one known to be dead his face all covered in bandages, playing in a half–destroyed arena, while Maddin sings their praises and curses the establishment of the NHL, which he regards as the beginning of the end. He says his father was a hockey executive, and he grew up in the locker room—was even born in the dressing room of the Winnipeg Maroons. According to him, Winnipeg has a secret network of back streets that parallels the main ones, and to pacify two rival taxi companies one was allowed to ride only on the main streets and the other only on the back alleys, where the ride over the snow is cushiony. The city he invents has an annual "If Day" when the town is invaded by mock Nazis who rename it "Himmlerstadt." A racetrack fire disaster caused a dozen horses to become buried in the earth with just their giant heads out of the snow in attitudes of agony. People come later to visit and picnic. In the family living room they watch a show called "Ledge Man" every day (it's run "for fifty years") in every episode of which the actress playing Maddin's mother talks the actor playing Maddin out of jumping from a ledge to his death.

Maddin calls this film, done for the "Documentary Channel," a "docu–fantasia," and that's what it is—sort of. It's hard to pin a genre to his film–making and this one is also an imaginary autobiography. He depicts himself living in an insular snow–globe parallel universe (sometimes fake slant lines of white snow are superimposed on scenes)—like the parallel system of back streets. The voice–over is a kind of crotchety incantation; Maddin has said this could be called "A Self–Destructive Sulk." What entertains, in its fey and offbeat way, is the man's humorous detachment; what appeals is the sense of a cozy far–off snowed–in world whose present is so remote it's like its past, a town that isn't very old but seems as if it is. For all the detail about growing up in a hairdressing establishment, lying in the living room with the family watching TV, being trapped in an indoor swimming pool complex on three levels among naked boys with "hairless boners" who refuse to swim, there's no sense of personal revelation at all, any more than in Dylan Thomas' "A Child's Christmas in Wales." And in his interweaving of the invented and the real, the contemporary and the archival in flickering dreamlike images, this movie has the power to enchant.

But also to numb. If Winnipeggers are sleepwalkers, the viewers of 'My Winnipeg' may at moments become sleep–sitters. And yet for a filmmaker so obviously withdrawn and secretive, this is his most autobiographical and perhaps most accessible and appealing work so far. "Amusing, elegant, inconsequential and it doesn't overstay its limited welcome," a London critic writes. I guess that's fair.

9. A loopy, mesmerising love–letter.



Author: [67rocks](#) from Sydney, Australia

13 June 2008

Screened with live director–narration at the Sydney Film Festival, *My Winnipeg* was not always easy to engage with but was, ultimately, one of the most satisfying filmic experiences of the Festival fortnight to–date.

Mixing surreal, dreamlike images with heartfelt reminiscents, Guy Maddin created extraordinary cinema that will linger long in the memory of all that witnessed it.

The first 20 minutes are the toughest slog – it takes a little while to comprehend exactly the direction this loving–yet–satirical homage to Maddin's home town is trying to accomplish. And I also have reservations as to how this is going to play to audiences without the immediate, personal engagement the live–narration provides – the connection the on–stage presence provided made for an intimacy that may not be otherwise available.

But, with no reservation, the dreamlike images, coupled with the heartfelt words of the creator, made for a unique, beautiful, hilarious, moving experience. This is a major work from an extraordinary talent; a must–see for those that crave films that engage the head and the heart.

10. Possibly Maddin's best film to date

Author: [ametaphysicalshark](http://ametaphysicalshark.wordpress.com) from prejudicemadeplausible.wordpress.com

5 January 2009

It's so hard to write about a Guy Maddin film. What exactly do I describe, what do I say about the film? His films defy convention in every way imaginable. I can guarantee that there is no film out there that's even especially similar to "*My Winnipeg*" in style or content, even if Maddin's current style is essentially a pastiche of a particular sort of silent film, there are none that are edited in the same way or used to quite the same effect as Maddin's films are. At least none that I have seen, as Maddin is not imitating anyone, but making films in a style that is not used anymore, and had he been making films in the 1920's he might have been considered an innovator. "*My Winnipeg*" is a film I wish I was clever enough to make about any of the cities I've lived in and fallen in love with, and is original enough to be captivating, but is also astonishingly clever and witty and funny and entertaining.

I was actually not a big fan of Maddin's last film, "*Brand Upon the Brain!*", a pleasant enough film but ultimately of no real worth or substance, merely a visually interesting retread of themes Maddin fans are familiar with. It was certainly a far cry from some of his better work– "*Archangel*" and "*Careful*" being my favorites. Maddin is certainly one of my favorite Canadian directors, and one of our few genuine auteurs whose work is actually accessible and available relatively easily, but there's always been an issue with his films, even his better work, the issue being that his films often feel rather insubstantial. Like the bizarre and amusing experiments of an eccentric than anything of real value (although obviously that is debatable). I always enjoy a Guy Maddin film, but I think "*My Winnipeg*" is the first of his which struck me as truly

passionate or exceptional with regard to its content.

"My Winnipeg" tells you everything you need to know about it in the title. This is Guy Maddin's love/hate letter to his home town of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and it's really about HIS Winnipeg, and it's the sort of personal thing that could have so easily been a bore, but Guy Maddin is so interesting that his own perception of Winnipeg is enough to sustain this 80 minute film. It flies by, leaving the viewer in an appreciative daze by the end, appreciative of the remarkable sense of humor in the film, the wit, the cleverness of the narrative, and a real sense of Maddin's love and passion for Winnipeg. This film has everything that is appealing about Maddin's work as well as a new richness that he'd never quite found before. It's an oddly inspiring film, gorgeous to look at and rather unexpectedly the funniest film I've seen from 2008 as well.

11. Guy Maddin returns with yet another funny, sexualized re-interpretation of his life.



Author: [Polaris_DiB](#) from United States
30 August 2008

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

This movie is just about as un-describable as Guy Maddin is. If you're familiar with who Guy Maddin is, then you're probably aware of this movie and how it fits into his general approach to film-making. If you're not, well, this would be a great way to be introduced.

"My Winnipeg" is fairly straight-forward in concept, it's just different in execution. Guy Maddin mixes fact and fiction (as he's wont to do) to make a sort-of documentary about Winnipeg, his home and geographical Oedipal complex. As usual, his approach involves some of the most strange, surreal analogies (strange because they come out of nowhere; surreal because they actually make sense and work for what he's going for); dark humor; silent era montage editing; and dark, dry humor. He narrates it himself with an angry, purposefully whiny voice, both intoning with audio the frustration he feels with the world he's trying to escape and the underlying love and passion for it. The "plot", if you'd call it that, is technically about him trying to leave Winnipeg, but by the time the end comes, you'll be convinced he doesn't really want to leave—even though he never says as much and the "plot" doesn't head in that direction.

Beware: here be demons. There's sleepwalkers, frozen horses, smashed deer, and sexual undertones to almost everything. There's re-enactments, found footage, animation, digital effects, and back-projection. There's montage editing, snow falling constantly, layered images, and repeated ostensibly failed takes. It's a whirlwind of paranoia, anxiety, hysterics, and humor, all with the usual black-and-white enclosed feeling that's inherent in many of Maddin's works, the type of imagery that feels like you barely perceive it at the back of your mind and yet it's right in front of your eyes (even when it is in color). And you will laugh. There's not much else

that can be said definitively about how to react to this movie, but laughter is a pretty good prediction.

But rest assured (and most amazingly): It's accessible! Maddin's commentary, intertitles, and playfulness is contagious, and even though his stream of thought seems awkward and even at times repetitive, it's easy to follow and summarily follows through to a good conclusion. This is the type of movie that proves that a movie can be "weird" and still abruptly entertaining. There's just not enough of that out there . . .

—PolarisDiB

12. Maddin's Winnipeg



Author: [zetes](#) from Saint Paul, MN

29 June 2008

Guy Maddin's ninth feature is a pseudo–documentary about the director's hometown of Winnipeg. It mostly focuses on his relationship with the city, but it also includes re–enactments of his family life and famous weird things that happened in the city's past. It's a bit of a mess, but, as I've said before regarding Maddin, his films play out like dreams. A mess makes sense a lot of the time. I do think the film lacks the focus of his best work, and is, in fact, my least favorite of his features. Also contributing to my relatively low opinion of it (i.e., I don't think it's one of the best movies ever) is Maddin's own narration. I loved his previous film, *The Brand Upon the Brain!*, but objected to the narration. It's even worse here, taking a lot of the mystique out of the silent film pastiche Maddin has been perfecting since *The Heart of the World* (I'm kind of hoping that he'll some day return to the stuff of his earlier works, which felt more like the films of the '30s than those of the '20s). My favorite sequences were the occult ceremony in the Masonic temple and the hockey legends game, where septuagenarians play one last game as their stadium is demolished by wrecking balls. Darcy Fehr of *Cowards Bend the Knee* returns as Guy Maddin, who, in the movie, is as desperate to leave his depressing hometown as he is to stay (throughout the movie, Fehr appears dozing in a train car that never seems to get out of Winnipeg). And Maddin dug up *Detour*'s Ann Savage, possibly literally, to play his mom.

13. Rewarding for those the curiosity and appetite to venture beyond mainstream movie entertainment

Author: [Harry T. Yung \(harry tk yung@yahoo.com\)](#) from Hong Kong

22 July 2008

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

"My Winnipeg" is my initiation to the work of Guy Maddin, and I like it immediately. Filmed essentially in black and white at 35 mm, this 80-minute "surreal documentary" (my own coining) is an exquisite piece of art work. Director Maddin's personal attribute to his home town is a tapestry with three themes developing in parallel, and interwoven.

The first is Maddin's surreal dreamy visions while reclining in his seat on a train leaving Winnipeg. The second is a kaleidoscope on the history of Winnipeg – endearing, joyful, absurd, exasperating, among other things. Finally, there is a re-enactment of scenes from Maddin's own intriguing childhood. All three are sprinkled with a wonderful sense of humour.

Emerging from the cinema with a feeling of elation akin to what one experiences after attending a superb classical concert, I wanted to explore more of director Maddin's work.

14. Our Winnipeg



Author: [BandofInsiders](#) from United States

9 December 2008

In My Winnipeg Guy Maddin takes up the task of vicariously reliving his childhood through making a movie re-creating his childhood. Maddin's pseudo documentary is constantly unpredictable film about a constantly predictable city. Maddin's unconventional travelogue absurdly examines the local history and folklore of Winnipeg while investigating Maddin's personal choice to never leave this sleepy snow drenched city.

Maddin decides to begin the process of documenting his time spent in Winnipeg by subletting his childhood home and hiring a group of actors to play the roles of his family members. Ann Savage takes on the role of Maddin's mother and the wheels begin turning on our Freudian nightmare. Winnipeg has the same strange magnetic pull on Maddin as his mother does and he intends to find out why. Maddin leaves no stone unturned and investigates multiple aspects of life in Winnipeg no matter how strange or preposterous. In his quest to find himself and find what lies at the heart of "his" city Maddin paints a portrait of Winnipeg that is at one point full of contempt for his hometown and at another filled with enchantment for it.

An aspect of this film that makes it so interesting is the fact that Maddin's decision to not change his longtime visual style actually works out for him even while working in a new "genre" for him. I use the word "genre" loosely. The characters and local oddities we encounter are constantly alluring and intriguing. While at times it may be confusing why Maddin decides to set his camera on certain subjects by the end of the film everything fits into place. At its best My Winnipeg is an oddly heartfelt tribute to a city that has burdened yet inspired Maddin for

his entire life. At the least My Winnipeg is a testament to Maddin as a producer who by some miracle convinced the Documentary Channel to fully commission a film so unique and so unmarketable.

15. Winnipeg exists



Author: Rectangular businessman from Peru

12 July 2012

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, all those places has taken on life on the screen through this nostalgic mix of old silent films and documentaries, videos, photos and animations, most black and white, supported by the beautiful narration of the director Guy Maddin. The surrealist style of this movie works incredibly well, moving between the dreams, the memories and the reality, resulting in something incredibly beautiful and unique.

"My Winnipeg" is one of the most fascinating film experiences ever made. Even when it is certainly one of those movies that one either does hate or love, I consider "My Winnipeg" one of the most extraordinary works of love ever done in the history of cinema, being able to make all the places described or just mentioned in this movie a part of our memories and souls as viewers.

16. Not witty, just whimsical . . .



Author: burntouthack from London

9 December 2010

Meh. Whimsical/bitter reminiscing with lots of made up facts and anecdotes which you can imagine some audiences rocking with mirth to but which aren't all that clever or witty – they're just very whimsical.

eg (my spoof)

Grainy b/w shots of someone in a living room being offered a cup of tea and drinking it with a smile

Narrator: A cup of tea. A cup of tea. My mother would always offer visitors a cup of tea. What is

this drink? This tea, cupped in porcelain, porcelain as white as the snow which falls outside onto our Winnipeg sidewalks? My mother served tea in a cup from a set her grandmother gave her, a cup which had come from the mayor's wife, who murdered her own sister, drowning her in a bath of Earl Grey. A drink of death. The cup of life. A cup of tea.

It's sort of like that, with a quick shot thrown in of the sister drowned in the bath of tea. 80 mins of that. Doesn't really have anything to say.

17. Guy Maddin takes us into his own fantasy



Author: [ryancarroll88](#) from Arroyo Grande, CA
27 September 2010

What is "My Winnipeg"? Sure, it's easy to dismiss it as an experimental film, but that's like blacklisting it to a future in some storage bin in a modern art museum, which would be a shame. The film claims to be a documentary about Guy Maddin's hometown, Winnipeg, MB. The footage shows what appears to be reenactments of Maddin's childhood, scenes from his family and a speckled history of the town. The narrative feels like it is being materialized just as Maddin thinks it, juggling arresting emotion and fleeting sentimentality. The repeating stock footage, circular cinematography and grizzly black and white tone make the film hypnotic to watch and add to its dream-like state.

From the beginning it's obvious that this 'reality' is pure imagination, a fantasy concocted by Maddin, but for what purpose? Why is he trying to escape reality and his hometown that he loves so dearly? The best way to understand is to watch it, accept it as truth like Maddin has, and experience the world as it becomes a much more magical place.

18. Euphemisms! Everything in this city is a Euphemism!!

Author: [MacAindra](#) from Canada
27 October 2008

My Winnipeg (2008) ****

Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Winnipeg. Everything in Winnipeg is a euphemism. Sleep walkers hold the keys to their old homes! By law! Nazi Fascists invaded Winnipeg! The coldest city in the world! Home of the Ultravixens! Forks and the Forks under the Forks, and the horsehead picnic tables! Hermaphrodite streets – half front street, half back lane! Masons, ghosts, spirits and sad buildings! Citizen Girl! Yes, you can find these things in Winnipeg, Winnipeg, wonderful

Winnipeg!

If you've ever seen a film like *My Winnipeg* before, it was likely only in your dreams, or the dreams of the mad poet of Winnipeg, Guy Maddin. Maddin's love of the silent film era has shaped his own visual style, shot usually on old grainy film stock, appearing as if his films were perhaps well preserved 1920s avant garde. He's built a career on making films so outrageously insane by modern film-making standards. His films are usually either bizarre horrors or totally unique comedies, or both. *My Winnipeg* is a film of sinisterly off the wall humor, conveyed through Guy Maddin's narration (played by Darcy Fehr). One gem: "My father died, with nothing left to do, he died. I'd like to say he spontaneously combusted on the ice at the area, that would have been great."

The narration often doubles back on itself, repeating itself in different forms, or entirely contradicting itself in single sentences. All the while the images (usually grainy black and white, but also occasionally in color or animation) are punctuated with flash cards, usually in single or short phrases (Tragedy! Dead Man walking! Dance of the Hairless Boners, Naked! Hairless! Dance! Swollen Pride! Why?!) They flash only for a fraction of a sentence, making them difficult to read.

I guess if *My Winnipeg* could be placed in a genre, they would have to call it a slapstick documentary. Maddin uses archive footage mixed with Maddin's own. The central thesis of the film is Maddin's memories and the city's as well. To begin, he rides a train, sleeping, while it rolls around the Winnipeg streets, seemingly unable to ever leave town. To come to terms with his inability to ever leave the city. He rents his old home for a month, to recreate his childhood memories. He recruits actors to play his siblings, and takes his mother (Ann Savage) to the home, then recreates memories and incidents from childhood. Maddin always seems to have a fascination with mothers, his mother. Elsewhere, he details the Masonic undercurrents of the city, the occult, man pageants, Nazi takeovers, and the rape of the city's beloved Winnipeg Jets by that corrupt National Hockey League!

So, the question that many ask then, "is it true?" Being Canadian, I know some things are true, some things are not. Would you want to really know the answer anyway? Its law that everyone gets to keep the keys to their old homes. Why? Because the town has the highest sleepwalking rate in the world! They leave their homes and wander to their old houses in the dark, in the cold, in the snow! You must let them in until they wake! Is that true? I don't care to know. If I knew then I would have to have come back to reality. Unless of course Maddin's *Winnipeg* is reality. In which case, Winnipeg! Wonderful Winnipeg!

19. Didn't work for me



Author: [bandw](#) from Boulder, CO

26 July 2011

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

I give this credit for being unusual, but that did not make it interesting for me. It is in grainy black and white and is a montage of Winnipeg scenes inter-cut with scenes of some half-asleep guy on a train spouting barely coherent sentences. This Kerouac wannabe got on my nerves. The train keeps moving and the guy keeps saying how he wants to leave Winnipeg, but the train never escapes the city. Maybe that is the message? The guy wants to leave, but he is so attached, or trapped by his past, that he can't get himself out?

I was fine with the general theme of having a love-hate relationship with your home town and regretting that many of the things you were fond of are paved over, torn down, or moribund. However, I had a hard time identifying with the tale told here. For example, there is an extended sequence that pays homage to hockey stars of the past that, if you have no interest in hockey as I, is less than interesting. I missed the point of having words intermittently flashed on the screen for a split second that simply echoed some of the narrated words.

I used to attend a series called "Experimental Cinema." I found most of the movies I saw in that series as failed attempts at art films. I would put this movie in that category. Not to say that it's a complete loss—the horses frozen in the river with their heads protruding above the ice is a scene one is not likely to forget. You don't know whether to laugh, cry, or wonder if it is even for real.

I think this movie gets a high rating since most of those who are inclined to see it are probably inclined to like it.

20. a hybrid to end all hybrids (?) with documentary, memoir, poetry all wrapped into another Maddin



Author: [MisterWhiplash](#) from United States

25 April 2009

Stanley Kubrick once said that Bergman, Fellini and De Sica were the only filmmakers who he thought weren't "artistic opportunists", meaning that whatever they made they had to make, not for any real financial consideration and that either they wrote or had other people write films for them. While I might not yet put Maddin quite as high in the ranks of masters as those Kubrick mention (albeit I've yet to see some of Maddin's obscurer efforts like *Careful*), I would add Maddin to that list of those in terms of never making a film to sell out or go for commercial

pursuits. He has to make films like *My Winnipeg* just as Allen Ginsberg would have to pick up a pen and write about the city. And every time he makes a film it's about film-making, about himself, about life and history and family and finding oneself over and over. Maddin is more accurately like Fellini in that if one were to ask "are you self-indulgent" they would say (maybe deadpan maybe not) "Yeah . . . And?"

In the case of *My Winnipeg* he takes a character on a train as the centerpiece (very loosely one at that) and transposes on him going through history – of the city of Winnipeg, of childhood, of and of his own sort of mental state connected to both. This "character" of sorts, if he even is one, is making a film about his family (because nothing says self-portrait like that) casting actors in the roles of his brothers and sister (even if one of them has been deceased for decades) and Ann Savage as his "mother" who in the film within *My Winnipeg* is a slightly loopy actress who can't always remember her lines. But for Maddin this isn't enough, of course, so he puts in folklore, the lineage of hockey in the city, of the tragedy of the hockey arenas (one being demolished the other sprouting up like a corporate weed), of what the city is like in January, what it's like to go to the local three-tier swimming pool, or the mystical power of forks – not silverware, like forks in the road.

As with other Maddin works like *Brand Upon the Brain*, one cannot really see *My Winnipeg* as classifiable. You just have to see it for yourself. I'm not sure if this is the best place to start with *My Winnipeg*, but it couldn't hurt. The only very slight thing, not exactly a downside, is that the completely and wonderfully cracked sense of humor Maddin has is not quite as in full force as in his masterpiece *Brand Upon the Brain*. And while the scenes with Ann Savage are rather incredible just for their 'is-it-or-is-it' sense of autobiography (maybe the deer scene is based on a real thing and the 'give-us-dinner-or-parakeet' isn't is a juicy question), they don't quite strike the same person chord as when Maddin goes into, oddly enough, documentarian mode with the city.

In part this is through him talking, as if in a mode not too unlike Michael Moore in *Roger & Me on Flynt*, to begrudge something like the old department store being demolished into a gaudy hockey arena that barely even counts as anything, in his eyes. It's moving to see him, as narrator, describe what happened to the hockey teams, those arenas, and then how one level didn't demolish since it was added on by the NHL in the 70s. Even better still is to see him insert "footage" of an senior-citizen hockey team that continues to play even as demolishing is taking place in the old Winnipeg arena. It all gets capped with a reminiscing of his father, who he says died a slow death, "shrinking in smoke until he was gone" once he lost his job at the hockey arena.

My Winnipeg is loaded with visual wonders that include the three "symbols" that seem to overlap the dreamer on the train (one of these might be a woman's crotch, I still can't be sure), the images of Ann Savage as a super-omniscient Mother of Winnipeg, and that pug, apparently a girlfriend of the director's, wandering around in the snowy January nights. *My Winnipeg* is epic poetry and epic film-making, but compact and made personal and warped, like digging

through a wizard's scrapbook. 9.5/10

21. The Forks . . .The Laps . . .The Best Documentary Of The Decade!



Author: [Joseph Sylvers](#) from United States

28 April 2009

Ledge Man! . . .Man–Pageants . . .Horses Heads Frozen In A Lovers Lake . . .The Two Rivers beneath the Two Rivers . . .The Sleepwalkers Laws . . .The Re–Enactments Of Family Arguments And Confusing Memories Of Yesteryear . . .Ghost Hockey Teams . . .and buildings which refuse to fall when demolished . . .one man must face all of this on a train, heading out of town. Before he can leave the place of his birth, he must pass through all those places which have become monoliths in his memory. Through the trains windows he sees these scenes play themselves out, or can dream them with his head pressed against the window. I've tried to watch Guy Maddins completely silent films in the past, and they've always felt excessive and thin in all the wrong places. "My Winnipeg" is a perfect marriage of auto–biography, fantasy, documentary, silent film, German expressionism, and surreal cabaret, basically all those things which Maddin draws his palate from. Manages to make Winnipeg, Canada, into a dreamy, personal, mythic place, the incommunicable way a place feels after you've lived at it all your life, the love/hate where all dreams come from, and where they all seek to escape. Oh, but there is a point about 10 minutes in, when the words "the lap . . .the fur . . .the forks . . ." will be repeated so many times, it will make you want to turn it off, if you don't you will have one of the most unique and even enjoyable experiences you can have with a movie. I looked forward to watching it again before it was over. Better every time I watch it!

22. Engaging, eccentric tribute to hometown



Author: [Andres Salama](#) from Buenos Aires, Argentina

22 August 2009

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

This engaging, very personal tribute from weird Canadian director Guy Maddin to his hometown of Winnipeg is very well done. Shot in black and white with his familiar style that reminds one of both silent cinema and the films of David Lynch, the plot has an alter ego of the director hire his elderly, domineering mother (actually b–movie starlet from the 1940s Ann Savage) and actors playing his siblings in order to relive his teenage years in the sixties, and sort of understand what makes him tick. The movie includes a lot of lore about Winnipeg that may be true in some cases and is almost certainly not true in other cases (the story about the frozen

horses' heads in the river, for example, is hard for me to believe). This deadpan, funny tribute is most of all a nostalgic paean to his childhood, and a denunciation of modern capitalism mindless drive to change all things (Maddin recounts in a heartfelt way how they demolished a popular department store as well as his beloved ice hockey arena, for example). And because nostalgia of our childhood is something that most people can relate to, this makes this movie more accessible than other films of him. The film explains also the reason he never leave Winnipeg (in order to defend it, and not let others completely ruin it) as well as a lot of the obsessions in his other movies (for instance, his fascination with communist aesthetics seems rooted in the strong labor movement in his hometown).

23. You Can Never Leave Home Again



Author: [druid333-2](#) from United States

29 July 2009

Canada's Guy Maddin is certainly a film maker who's films are for some a joy ride into the unknown, while for others an acquired taste. His influences are (among others) some of the films of silent era Soviet documentary film maker Dziga Vertov (Kino Pravda), and Serge Eisenstein (Ivan The Terrible, Alexander Nevsky), as well as some of the pioneer experimental film makers of the 1950's & 1960's, such as Kenneth Anger (Scorpio Rising), Stan Brakhage (The Way To Shadow Garden) & Jack Smith (Flaming Creatures). In this entry, Maddin manages to evoke a love/hate letter to his hometown of Manitoba, Winnipeg. The film seems to be part documentary, part rant on whatever happened to his beloved hometown. Besides incorporating some original home movies, he re-enacts moments from his youth & adulthood with a cast of Canadian actors. Sequences of animation add to this cinematic fever dream that some will love, others will probably walk out on. Not rated by the MPAA, this film contains flashes of nudity, sexual content, rude language & some violent content. Best to leave the little ones home (who would probably be either very confused or bored by it all)

24. Guy Maddin's best



Author: [rschmeec](#) from United States

13 July 2008

Ah, Guy Maddin, how I love your combination of voice-over, quickly changing shots that seem to perfectly match the voice-over, a tone that mixes nostalgia and subtle disgust, the history of your hometown and your own at the same time, seeming to tell all, while really telling more than all.

Are we really expected to believe that bit about the horses escaping from a fire? I don't really

care. In this case fiction, if not stranger, is certainly more fun than whatever the truth.

I saw this recently at the 2008 Seattle Film Festival, along with sixty or seventy other films, and the only other one that kept me so continually spellbound was Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*.

If you are already a lover of Guy Maddin, you do not need my recommendation. If you are not yet familiar with his unique genius, *My Winnipeg* is a good place to begin a discovery.

25. Odd and uneven look at an artist and the town he grew up in



Author: [dbborroughs](#) from Glen Cove, New York
23 June 2008

I don't "get" Guy Maddin's films. Actually that should read I don't like them. They are for the most part neo-silent films pretentiously melded with an artistic bent with a sense that Dwain Esper suddenly was crossed with Andy Warhol (thats not quite right but it'll serve as a place holder). They tend to be too knowing as well.

It was with some trepidation that I plopped down to watch his *My Winnipeg* on IFC in Theaters on Cable.

Essentially an autobiography of Maddin crossed with a history of the city where he lives this is film that has some of the most wonderful moments I've seen all year. Its not a perfect film, there is too much talk of trains and sleep and roads out at the start that I was ready to bail early on. The endless shots of the snow covered streets will make you want to move to Florida. There are other touches that may make you scream or want to hit the fast forward, and yet there are other times when the film spins such wonderful tales (the séance in the municipal building) that the film redeems its dull spots. Its also hauntingly filmed at times with a nice other worldly effect.

I don't know what else to say. Its worth a shot on cable or DVD where you can control the flow of the dull bits. Probably the most accessible of all of Maddin's films.

26. so bad it hurts . . .



Author: [LovinMoviesMakinGames](#) from United States
10 June 2008

***** This review may contain spoilers *****

First, thank you to all the people who, gave this a great review. I'm sure you have a great relationship with the director. I'm sure you did him a great favor. However, the \$7 I paid for watching this on PPV will never come back.

So here I am, a Winnipeg raised, U of W educated California transplant, hoping to watch a funny movie, or even mildly entertaining movie about Winnipeg. I am soooooo....
Disappointed.

Why?!?!? Some movies are stylish or eclectic for artistic reasons. "300", Cashern, "Island of lost children", "Sin City" are good mainstream examples. Show a story from a different perspective. This move was simply "odd" for the sake of being odd. It had no entertainment value. I just kept asking myself..why??? what is the point of this scene?!?!? Guy, come on... at least write something witty for us. Winnipeg is an entire city with plenty of things to poke fun at. The Simpsons did a better job of poking fun at Winnipeg then you.