

**Maximum Inconsequence:  
Regina Films and Videos of the 1980s**  
Essay for Neutral Ground Gallery screening

*Maximum Inconsequence* isn't designed to be a complete overview and representation of all styles of moving image production in 1980s Regina, but is more of a personal observation of common ideas and subtextual themes through several works produced in the city during this period. *Maximum Inconsequence* certainly isn't an all-inclusive package, and many of the city's best-known film and video creators unfortunately are not represented. In fact, many of the people who have made works presented in this package to date have not made another film or video. Perhaps they became too despondent after the first one.

If there was a mean demographic for a Regina filmmaker during the 1980s, arguably the stats would be: late- or post-boomer, white, male and with a middle-class upbringing in the suburbs (or the Regina equivalents thereof). These products of 1960s and 70s breeding likely understood they were not brought up in the centre of the known universe, but felt secure in a world they co-inhabited with Dominion grocery stores, the Roughriders and the Sunset Amusement Park. The civilized world had completely passed Regina by; at the end of the seventies, cable TV was still somewhat of a novelty and there was only one 24-hour doughnut franchise outlet in town, and it closed at midnight. Life was uncomplicated and nothing indicated that it would get any worse.

To provide some context into this era and its resulting Levittown placidity, we start with **The New Wild West** (1971?); this short commercial film may not be familiar in name but perhaps in content to those who lived in Regina at around this time. **The New Wild West** was produced as "program filler" between television shows on a local station. Although humorously dated in content and technique, **The New Wild West** provides some insight into the optimism of the middle-class lifestyle prevalent in Regina and reinforced the belief that the economy would continue to expand until doomsday, an attitude that shaped the outlook of many future Regina filmmakers.

Pessimism. Pure and simple. This is the common thread throughout the remaining films. The kindling of the eighties saw many developments that did not appear to bode well for the future of North American (and global) youth:

The advent of the Reagan Presidency and the subsequent heightened concern that civilization would be reduced to scores of postatomic berry-picking nomads by decade's end;

The power of rock music as a youth-unifying and mobilizing force was waning, with the influence of punk rock diminishing, heavy metal devolving into corporate glam, and the biggest-selling recording of 1981 being Asia's debut album;

The growing realization among those who would one day be branded with the moniker of "Generation X" that fulfillment based upon economic gospel was in fact a red herring and things would not necessarily be better in the future, assuming that some gimbalhead didn't accidentally load a military-exercise tape into the Strategic Air Command's computer system and we'd all play out a nuclear Armageddon scenario for real.

Through visions of mushroom-cloud nightmares, cultural malaise and a soon-to-be-shrinking economy, an ennui-induced "live for the moment" ethic (minus the rhapsody that such an otherwise Dionysian concept implies) became prevalent. To get by, day after day, all you really had to remember was:

There is no sure thing in life.

All experience is transitory; nothing is permanent.



Answers are not dependably found; therefore there is no real chance for closure. Or denouement, by implication.

No action can have any *real* consequence, for consequence implies a future that we might grasp as a tenement for our hopes.

There exists an uneasy yet variable relationship between technology and a non-technological world in many of the films in *Maximum Inconsequence*: when they take adversarial roles, technology is handily beaten by the environment (a car loses out to a Saskatchewan blizzard; a wheelchair overturns on the slightest of inclines); when it is used as a plot device, technology is a channel, or perhaps an instigator, for evil tendencies (whether technology is represented by a corkscrew or a television station); when turned against itself, technology is a compliant saboteur of other modern technological creations such as office towers or cinematic conventions (a building is imploded; a camera lens acts as a balloon paddle). In an environment where the extremes of weather are comical, depressing and sometimes tragic, the failure of technology in nature's wake is not an unexpected perception from someone raised in Saskatchewan.

Apocalypse is on the horizon in these films, whether implied, intonated, or depicted: this might not only be due to the lingering nuclear threat that prevailed through most of the 1980s, but also because of the isolation of Regina, a pocket of meager urban comforts, plunked in the middle of an infinite wasteland of snow that occasionally goes away for a month or two.

The normal rules of narrative cause-and-effect do not apply, despite that many of the films in this package are driven by plot: standard narrative film convention dictates that by the time closure is achieved, a change must have occurred in the protagonist that empowers him/her to in turn affect change upon his/her world. It is a rare occurrence in *Maximum Inconsequence* when the world of the film has been altered; closure is more of a Rorschach test, with beginnings often mirroring endings, and the final interpretation of meaning left to the viewer. The characters in the films fight their way back to the beginning; they've learned nothing as none of the events in the story has any lasting consequence upon their lives.

As a prelude to Regina films produced in the eighties, Stephen Surjik's **Razor in the Wind** (1979) is fitting: its stark, minimal black-and-white cinematography captures a feeling of impending catastrophe that never quite seems to arrive. Not only is technology a bane within the film's content, a similar attitude carries into its execution: both sound and picture editing are kept to a bare minimum, enabling the rhythms of realism to counterpoint **Razor in the Wind's** surreal content. The Saskatchewan winter is an apocalyptic environment; technology (and humanity) are forces that pale by comparison.

**Razor in the Wind** had a noticeable influence on many subsequent films produced through the Saskatchewan Filmpool Co-operative and the University of Regina's Department of Film and Video, two bastions of Regina image production in which Surjik had spent some time before moving away to Montreal and eventually to Toronto, to pursue a career directing theatrical and made-for-television movies.

The expectations of "the Regina experience" are drastically altered in Don List's **My Beautiful Old-Time City** (1982). His film depicts apocalypse without renewal: a venerated symbol of Regina's permanence is destroyed and for many, so too was a vital connection with the past. The Regina of old was vanishing and this film captures that barren reality.

Brian Stockton's **The Floting of Mike** (1986) is a slice of Regina history, a vérité biography detailing



the last days of CKCK Radio's evening disk jockey, Mike Benny. No action has any consequence: barbs are thrown, teenage girls are berated over the phone-in line, but despite this, nothing ever changes in Mike's world. The structure of the film is equally as inconsequential: closure is artificially imposed by the filmmaker's explanation near the film's end. Otherwise there is no rational reason why it couldn't go on for hours.

Trevor Cunningham's controversial film **Outskirts** (1989) is a continuation of the visual style and rhythm of **Razor in the Wind**, and Gerald Saul and Brian Stockton's feature-length film, **Wheat Soup** (1988): the pace is leisurely, the visuals are tightly controlled and formalist, sound and editing are minimal and used only when absolutely necessary. There is a subtextual contrast between country landscape and city, yet both are equally foreboding environments. Each character is identified with a dilapidated vehicle: an old car, a faulty wheelchair, a rusty bicycle. Technology is dysfunctional and breeds dysfunctionality. **Outskirts**, like its black-and-white predecessors, implies a postapocalyptic environment without implicitly stating its cause. The protagonist maintains his status quo, as does the world around him.

Wayne Selby's **Symbol of Democracy** (1988) features the voice of then-Saskatchewan government opposition leader Roy Romanow, forecasting economic apocalypse should the Brian Mulroney-bartered free trade deal with the United States take effect. Destruction is imminent but never occurs; instead, we are in a continual state of anxiety with no release and no closure. We are left spinning inside the rotunda of the Legislative Building with no escape in sight, ironically only after the point where we are allowed full knowledge of the message hidden in the soundscape. Information is a burden: democracy is an empty edifice where the voices of ghosts caterwaul for no one.

Scott Jacques' **All the Girls are Called Angel** (1988) presents Regina as an environment of minimal spectacle and minimal challenge, providing proper atmosphere for the two main characters who sustain themselves on 7-11 hot dogs, and narcotics. No action taken has any moral consequence, nothing occurs that permanently affects the character's relationship with each other or their world, namely Regina. Even death is not a moral consequence, merely an inconvenience. Once again, there is rejection of standard narrative closure: although there is a structural closure in a sense, the dual protagonists maintain their status quo. They do not change, and neither do they cause change in their world. **Angel**, Brian Stockton's feature-length comedy **The 24 Store** (1990) and Mark Wihak's **The Ballad of Don Quinn** (1992) are arguably the defining "Regina trilogy" of films about this city and how its peculiar inertia-propagating tendencies affect all those who live within its confines.

Jackie Dzuba's **Imagistic Terrorist** (1989) was filmed in the old diner of Regina's train station, soon to be closed to the general public: this work is a formal study of personal reflection in an environment of decay (on a cynical note, personal reflection in an environment of decay just might be the most common pastime in Regina). **Imagistic Terrorist** is contemplative, and offers no answers.

Although Brett Bell's **Tears of a Clown: The Maredrew Tragedy** (1989) is not set in Regina but in a fictitious Saskatchewan town, it deals with many of the same issues as the other narratives in *Maximum Inconsequence*, such as alienation and the curse of technology. **Tears of a Clown** is a rejection of the artificiality imposed by media, and in a sense brings us full circle from acceptance of the imposed "city with a future" attitude illustrated by *The New Wild West* and industrial/commercial sector productions of the 1960s and 70s. Again, there is no actual conclusion: the story ends artificially, with no actual resolution and no sign that the status quo has been altered.

Bringing us into the nineties, Mark Wihak's **Terra Incognito** (1990) shows a glimpse of the future; stark formalism is maintained, but there is a symbiotic (yet still uneasy) relationship between environment and technology. The camera transforms existing landscape into a hybrid state between machine-

construct and nature, a humanistic and controlled attempt to bridge the gap between a non-technological world and technology.

On a personal note, Mark may have been the most optimistic filmmaker that Regina produced during this period.

Ironically enough, he moved away from Regina in 1992.

First to Montreal.

And then to Toronto.

Brett Bell  
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