



PROJECT MUSE®

Guy Maddin's *the Night Mayor*, Imaginary Media, and Contemporary Melodrama

Darren Wershler

Criticism, Volume 55, Number 4, Fall 2013, pp. 677-694 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/crt/summary/v055/55.4.wershler.html>

GUY MADDIN'S *THE NIGHT* MAYOR, IMAGINARY MEDIA, AND CONTEMPORARY MELODRAMA

Darren Wershler

What is the structure of contemporary melodrama, and how does that structure relate to imaginary media? These questions are the residue from the research that I conducted for my last book, Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (2010),¹ when I began to consider the frequent appearances of imaginary media in Maddin's other films, and the astonishing range of media techniques deployed in their production. Maddin is one of contemporary cinema's premier melodramatists, so the regular appearance of imaginary media in his work deserves some consideration. Fanciful devices such as the giant scope that the heroine uses to observe the world's beating heart in *Heart of the World* (2002)² and the Aerophone in *Brand upon the Brain!* (2008)³ play supporting roles in Maddin's films, but, in *The Night Mayor* (2009),⁴ a fictional device called the Telemelodium takes center stage. Through the fabrication of its history, and the history of its inventor, Nihad Ademi, Maddin depicts Canada as a melodramatic nation sutured together by the broadcasting of its dreams.

The Telemelodium presents an apposite allegory for the ideological function of the Office National du Film du Canada/National Film Board of Canada (NFB or ONF/NFB). *The Night Mayor* was commissioned in 2009 for the NFB's seventieth anniversary (founded 1939) by Cindy Whitten, Director General of the NFB English Program. What Maddin produced, slyly, is a film about the difference between the cultural armature of the Canadian government as it might have been, a kind of technological armature that aids and abets the creation of an Imaginary utopia, and the grim alternative, an instrument of cultural policy weighed down by its own bureaucracy and instrumentalist requirements for official communication. This is where the imaginary media forms that manifest in the thematic content of the film (the Telemelodium itself) and the material effects of the Real (the flickering film, the odd murky sound track) merge, producing a film that celebrates noise over signal as a political

as well as aesthetic choice. In the process, it also suggests that one of the differences between the structure of twenty-first-century melodrama and that of early-twentieth-century melodrama is the way that each is articulated with specific media technologies.

On 4 March 2009, the NFB issued a press release announcing that, as part of the celebrations for their seventieth anniversary, Guy Maddin had been commissioned to begin work on *The Night Mayor*.⁵ The official synopsis of this film reads as follows: “Winnipeg, 1939: Inventor Nihad Ademi harnesses the waves of the Aurora Borealis and uses the power to broadcast images of Canada to its own citizens from coast to coast. The unregulated imagery enrages the government, who send a crack team of federal agents to shut Nihad’s project down.”⁶ The entirety of the film, approximately fourteen minutes long, is available for viewing on the NFB’s website (http://www.nfb.ca/film/night_mayor).

The Night Mayor is a nonlinear barrage of short shots stitched together with a stream-of-consciousness, dreamy first-person narration from Bosnian émigré Nihad Ademi, interspersed with short expository interjections from two of his six adult children: Dado/David and Selma. Maddin’s work is anything but plot-driven, but, for those who have not seen the film, here is a brief summary: Obsessed with the night sky, Ademi, a tuba-playing musician, falls in love with the sounds of the Northern Lights. Abandoning his tuba, he invents a new instrument he dubs the Telemelodium, which he constructs and perfects with the help of his children. At first, Ademi only wants to share the music of the Aurora with the rest of Canada, but he soon discovers that the music has optical powers. For Ademi, the images that his invention creates from the light of the “false dawn” epitomize a specific sort of knowledge: “Mine is the peculiar truth which comes from the false,” he says. Dado/David describes the Telemelodium as “a kind of natural television, which converted the music made by the Aurora Borealis into moving pictures.” From Winnipeg, at the geographic center of the continent, the device broadcasts its images of everyday life to Canadian subscribers who have purchased a pair of Telemelodium speakers. The machine begins to develop a mind of its own and to produce pictures that had not been programmed into it, including nude pictures of one of his daughters. At the first flush of success, though, the government sends police to shut down Ademi’s operation. Ademi forgives them and returns to his reverie, with a final musing on the possibility that whalesong might produce “safe pictures” that will bother no one.

Driving home the allegorical nature of the project, the NFB press release announcing the commission adds, “What [Maddin] has envisioned is an imaginative cinematic riff on the significance of a public film

producer.”⁷ Neither the press release nor the film’s description mentions the Telemelodium, the device that epitomizes this act of imagination, yet everything about Maddin’s plot turns around it. Similarly, I believe that critical accounts frequently overlook representations of technology within melodrama and descriptions of specific technologies that have been employed in the production of melodrama.

The melodramatic character of Maddin’s work is well established in criticism, notably in the work of William Beard, who argues that melodrama characterizes Maddin’s entire oeuvre.⁸ Maddin himself has taught the course “You Show Me Your Melodrama, I’ll Show You Mine”⁹ in the University of Manitoba’s English Department Film Studies Program, and has described his personal theory of melodrama in considerable detail.¹⁰ There are some significant differences between Maddin’s interpretation of melodrama and Beard’s characterization of it that are worth mentioning at this point. Beard argues, “The glaring excess of Maddin’s melodrama is then a deliberate exaggeration, an exaggeration unto parody, of perceptions and affects that cannot be expressed in a more uncovered form in the contemporary environment.”¹¹ For Beard, the melodramatic excesses of Maddin’s film are symptoms of “naive and extreme emotions, rooted in childhood and requiring a quasi-childlike intensity and directness of expression,” which appear grotesque under the prohibitive conditions of “adult” culture. From this perspective, contemporary culture is sick because it cannot recognize the expression of such emotion and has no occasion for its “proper” expression.¹² In contrast, Maddin observes,

A lot of people think melodrama is the truth exaggerated, but [Eric Bentley] says it’s the truth uninhibited. There’s a big difference: if you take something that’s true and exaggerate it, you are distorting it, and it may no longer be true. If you take the truth, which is barely discernible, and uninhibit it, you’re actually making it more visible, and there’s no distortion at all.¹³

For Maddin, melodrama is a device for presenting material that is “psychologically and affectively true without being historically accurate.”¹⁴ In other words, melodrama can serve as a kind of ideological litmus test, registering the presence of personal and cultural trauma visibly and/or audibly. But one of the most interesting aspects of Maddin’s work is that the uninhibited truths that melodrama presents do not appear solely on the level of plot, theme, or character. In *The Night Mayor*, trauma does not manifest in the affect of the characters; there’s none of the “heightened

dramatic utterance and gesture”¹⁵ that Peter Brooks describes as part of the “precise ‘sublimity’ of melodramatic rhetoric”¹⁶—no histrionic facial expressions, exaggerated gestures, or screams. There are no dramatic musical cues in the sound track, and the narration is uniform, monotone, soporific. Instead, the traumatic uninhibited truths in *The Night Mayor* manifest on the level of material media itself, in the form of the rapid-fire, choppy editing, the extreme grain and contrast of the shots, sudden tilts in camera angle, jittery motion, blurring, blotches and glitches, and squelches and static in the sound track. The visible signs that truth is not distorted in this film, then, are the very material distortions that are emphasized rather than concealed by the editing process.

Slavoj Žižek contends that, in contemporary cultural objects, truth does not appear in marginal symbolic practices intended to subvert a restrictive social order, such as the childlike, extreme emotions that Beard describes. Instead, our glimpses of truth appear in traumatic moments that resist symbolization altogether.¹⁷ The material quality of Maddin’s films could be characterized with a catalog of such effects of the Real: “grainy or high-contrast film, visual noise, digital glitches, abrupt switches between media types, and continuity gaps, or the sound track’s hisses, pops, tinny tones, acousmatic voices and scratches.”¹⁸ Ken White argues, “Out-of-synch audio, incongruous lines of sight and awkward match-on-action editing *undermine* [my emphasis] the structuring melodramatic narrative of Guy Maddin’s cinema.”¹⁹ However, as glitch theorist Tom McCormack aphorizes, “[W]hat we call content is the real accident and accidents are the true reality.”²⁰ I contend that the specific form of melodrama and the qualities of material media in Maddin’s films (on both a thematic level and a substantive level) are deeply imbricated. The ways that this assemblage functions, however, differ substantially from the early-twentieth-century melodramas from which Maddin’s films draw their inspiration.

Ben Singer’s *Melodrama and Modernity* (2001) usefully formulates melodrama as a “cluster concept” whose constitution “varies from case to case in relation to a range of basic features or constitutive factors,”²¹ including pathos, overwrought emotion, moral polarization, nonclassical narrative structure, and sensationalization.²² Melodrama, in other words, is a discursive formation whose articulation can vary according to time and place. Singer concludes by speculating about the possibility of adapting his model to study the melodramas of other time and places by shifting the terms of analysis.²³ Some of the objects inside the discursive formations of melodramas of other times and places may look the same, may even have the same names, but their different articulations will mean that in all likelihood they will function differently. Moreover, there may

be elements in some assemblages that are not present in others. These are the sorts of questions that it's necessary to ask when considering the structure of contemporary melodrama in general and Maddin's melodramas in particular.

Singer describes in detail how technology was essential to both the form and subject matter of early (ca. 1910) melodrama on stage and then screen:

On stage, sensation scenes showcased the latest marvels of the machine age, its *mise-en-scène* rendering (or whenever possible presenting in actuality) every conceivable emblem of the industrial era: locomotives, steamships, fire engines, submarines, automobiles, motorboats, subways, hot-air balloons, motorcycles, suspension bridges, steam hammers, pile drivers, spinning machines, etc.²⁴

Moreover, spectacular scenic effects (volcanic eruptions, waterfalls, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, etc.) “required the invention of sophisticated mechanical stagecraft. . . . [Melodrama] epitomized a machine-age theater, a theater inextricable from the instrumental rationality of technology.”²⁵ It's important to realize that the converse of this statement is also true: as Eric Kluitenberg contends, machine-age instrumental rationality produced a “specific mixture of fascination and fright” attached directly to the machines that gave substance and form to the “big Other.”²⁶ In other words, machine-age technology did not simply help to produce melodrama; it was, in its presence and in the sensations that it produced, melodramatic in and of itself.

Brooks contends that the specific modernity of melodrama as a form has to do with the loss of tragic vision.²⁷ Without the ability to invoke traditional master narratives about truth and ethics on a grand scale through the ancient tropes of tragedy, melodrama struggled to find new, emphatic ways to articulate the importance of “simple truths and relationships”²⁸ in order to express their specific sublimity. But modernity was changing the constitution of the sublime, as well. In *American Technological Sublime* (1994), David Nye chronicles the way that modernity transformed the sublime from a philosophical idea linked to the solitary experience of nature to something that emerged from particular cultural practices—specifically, the experience of crowds of tourists at various kinds of attractions, often technological. Where an encounter with the natural sublime forces an individual into a consideration of their puniness in relation to the awesome powers of nature, an encounter with the technological sublime substitutes the powers of

the state for those of the natural world.²⁹ In the 1920s, a new kind of symbolic drama emerged around the spectacular display of new technologies in action, where not just the specific technology, but its performance, became sublime.³⁰ Accordingly, in *The Night Mayor*, the simple truths that Ademi wishes to convey do not appear through the natural form or the Aurora, or through the emotions of himself or his children, but through the film's extensive displays of the Telemelodium itself in operation. What is at stake for him in the visions of his machine is not his individual worth, but the relationship between all Canadians.

But what about the contemporary moment? Maddin's melodrama is populated not with functioning technologies but with representations of imaginary media presented in a hybrid digital–analog form. With what sort of rationality—or irrationality—is it affiliated?

The term *imaginary media* is helpful because of its conceptual richness. It emerges out of the field of media archaeology (a subdiscipline of media history) and was the subject of a 2004 conference whose proceedings have been gathered into *The Book of Imaginary Media* (2006).³¹ German media theorist Siegfried Zielinski splits imaginary media into three separate groups of phenomena: untimely media (realized in technical and media practice either long before or after their invention), conceptual media (sketched, modeled, or drafted but not actually built), and impossible media (which cannot actually be built but nevertheless express ideas that impact the factual world of media).³² I would add to this definition the importance of reading the word *Imaginary* in the context of the weight that it accrues in the Marxist-psychoanalytic tradition, as in Louis Althusser's famous definition of ideology as “the Imaginary relationship of the subject to its Real conditions of existence.”³³ As the stuff of fantasy, imaginary media frequently play an ideological role, sometimes covering up the traumatic contradictions of existence, sometimes embodying them. Imaginary media is not a synonym for nonexistent technologies, then. (Maddin's Telemelodium is based loosely on a real device, the Telharmonium, a subject to which I'll return.) What the concept of imaginary media does is provide a way of highlighting the political work that both actual and fictional media have performed in the past, are performing now, or could perform if actually realized.

In Zielinski's taxonomy of imaginary media, devices such as the Telemelodium belong to the subcategory of “impossible media”—fictional devices that could not actually be constructed because the principles of their operation are rooted in fantasy rather than known scientific principles. Nevertheless, impossible media can have considerable impact on individuals—and even entire cultures—because they embody deep

ideological convictions about how we'd like the universe to work, or how we suspect the universe works, rather than how it actually works. Félix Guattari notes that impossible media function by incorporating their audiences into their very assemblage: "At the very moment you say, 'this machine is impossible,' you fail to see that you are making it possible by being yourself one of its parts, the very part that you seemed to be missing in order for it to be already working."³⁴ Once this articulation is accomplished, impossible media become capable of presenting their audiences with an affective or emotional truth. This process is ongoing: Kluitenberg observes that one of the defining characteristics of imaginary media is that they mediate the impossible relations between subjects and their objects of desire; "they are compensation machines for a necessarily failed relationship," but "the point of these apparatuses is not to resolve, but to perpetuate this impossible relationship."³⁵ In other words, the function of imaginary media is ideological in nature; they are placeholders for some sort of structural impossibility that makes a given symbolic field possible, even though its very existence must be disavowed.³⁶ The type of symbolic field that is of specific relevance to *The Night Mayor* is the concept of nation.

Benedict Anderson argues that any community is just such a symbolic field, but he is particularly interested in the formation of nations, which are Imaginary in the sense that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."³⁷ Material media, in conjunction with the communication protocols³⁸ and social rituals³⁹ that accompany them (such as buying a daily paper to read on the train to work, watching the same nightly news report, or following a national political reporter's Twitter feed), sustain that collective act of imagination. The belief that we perform such actions simultaneously, even ritually, with millions of our fellow citizens, even though we have little or no direct contact with them, is part of what holds a nation together.⁴⁰

Kluitenberg presents a similar line of reasoning, maintaining that any communicative process has a considerable phantasmatic dimension that has more to do with what we imagine is shared than what is actually shared.⁴¹ This imaginary dimension, combined with the rapid pace of media change, means that there is always a large potential for difference in the way that different nations imagine themselves at different times. Just as Singer argues for different articulations of melodrama in different eras, Anderson suggests that nations are distinguished from one another by the *style* of their imagining.⁴² What Maddin presents in *The Night Mayor* is his vision of a melodramatic Canada, briefly sutured together by

the Telemelodium and then sustained by the half-memory of that fleeting communion.

Serra Tinic writes,

Canada may provide an example of the ultimate modern imagined community. National public broadcasting was intentionally designed to counteract the effects of geographic vastness and provide a sense of national self-consciousness to the diverse regional, linguistic, Native, and immigrant groups within the country's boundaries.⁴³

From its faux-title screen onward, which suggests that the film is part of Film Commissioner Arthur Irwin's largely forgotten, low-budget 1952 educational series of personal vignettes, called "Faces of Canada,"⁴⁴ *The Night Mayor* plays with this sense of national half-consciousness. A map of CANADA (all caps in the film) figures prominently on the set, unified by radial lines representing the Telemelodium broadcasts that stream forth from from Winnipeg to the rest of the nation. Maps themselves are a powerful communication technology that "shaped the way that the colonial state imagined its dominion."⁴⁵ In "Deconstructing the Map" (1989), J. B. Harley has written extensively about the ideology of cartography, pointing out that, despite their claims to objective representation, maps are always as much "a commentary on the social structure of a particular nation or place as it is on its topography."⁴⁶ Maps help to structure and justify particular visions of what a territory and its occupants could or should be. In Maddin's earlier film, *My Winnipeg* (2010), maps play a prominent role in establishing in the citizens' Imaginary. In an instance of classic Surrealist montage, the film's opening sequence repeatedly superimposes a map of the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (the location of the city) with an image of a naked woman's pubic mound, tying the city and its various systems of circulation irrevocably to the narrator's maternal anxieties. The film also includes found footage of a monochrome animated sequence of a North American map, where broadcast waves and twinkling stars emanate from Winnipeg to cover the country.⁴⁷ This latter image directly evokes Nihad Ademi's narration describing the function of the Telemelodium in *The Night Mayor*.

Ademi says,

I hear a tingle from afar and I respond with shooting out images. . . . Images of everyday life for everyday people. Images. Anyone with a phone, anywhere, anywhere. Anywhere

across this country—East, West, North, anywhere. I show Canada to itself: the sum of ordinary things. Ordinary things combined and made miraculous.⁴⁸

The Telemelodium doesn't broadcast its signals straight into the ether; it piggybacks them on the telephone network. This is significant, because, as Michèle Martin outlines in *"Hello, Central?" Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (1991), the telephone's Imaginary capacity has always been an important aspect of the Canadian discourse of nation building. Early publicity from the Bell Telephone Company not only claimed that purchasing a household telephone was a moral obligation for good citizens but also that the telephone could "save the Nation."⁴⁹ The roles that the telephone played in the construction of the Canadian nation, though, were not always the ones that Bell imagined or desired.

Martin goes on to argue that, despite the standard uses of the telephone that Bell prescribed in its advertising—and the accompanying implication that nonstandard uses were unacceptable to the company—Canadians could and did imagine and employ "unreasonable" and "unexpected" uses for their telephones.⁵⁰ Likewise, the Telemelodium, a utopian device that weaves together a new culture out of fragments of everyday life, displays the capacity to create emergent uses as more people begin to use it. What *The Night Mayor* dramatizes so nicely is Michael Warner's contention that "there are contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics, tensions that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public's exclusions or ideological limitations."⁵¹ The community of practice that forms around the Telemelodium in Maddin's film is not stable enough to form a lasting counterpublic or change actual policies around national media deployment. Likewise, writes Martin, "Early telephony engendered imaginative uses which have since disappeared. . . . [M]ost of those original and spontaneous uses were later eliminated. Those that remained cannot be attributed solely to the technical attributes of the telephone."⁵² What remains despite the disappearance of those early use patterns⁵³ is a properly utopian sense of potential.

Like all utopian devices, the Telemelodium necessarily fails, but not without making an explicitly political point. Ademi says, "The government came. Police came to stop the music. They came to stop the music of Ademi. Why did they do that? They said it was filling up the phone lines used by citizens. They said it was jumbling our military signals."⁵⁴ Here, the atemporal nature of Maddin's aesthetic asserts itself, because the referent for this line belongs not only to the early twentieth century, but also to

the early twenty-first century. During the US invasion of Iraq (2003–11), it became evident that, partly because of increasing commercial and public use of the Internet (including the bandwidth used by news media to report on the war itself), US troops were facing a bandwidth shortage that significantly affected where drones and ships could be deployed and what types of files soldiers could send and receive.⁵⁵ In a contemporary context, where resistance to nomadic digitized state power necessarily involves finding new ways of interfering with network-based systems of command and control,⁵⁶ a device like the Telemelodium becomes a kind of blueprint for the benevolent but nevertheless disruptive equivalent of a denial of service (DoS) attack, where a computer is overwhelmed by spurious connection requests to the point where it can't respond to legitimate ones.

On the levels of both form and substance, *The Night Mayor* continually problematizes the notion that it's ever possible to distinguish between signal and noise. Before it displays a photographic image, the film displays visual "noise," which is not an artifact of wear from running through countless elementary-school projectors but has been manufactured digitally. As with nearly all of Maddin's films, no pristine version of the final product precedes a degraded one; everything is of a piece, and the decision to focus on representational or nonrepresentational aspects of the film is arbitrary, because neither predominates. The first photographic image that does appear is of the Aurora Borealis, a visual and audible manifestation of charged particles from the solar wind encountering the Earth's atmosphere—the noise of the Real itself. On the accompanying sound track, before a word of dialogue, there is the sound of hiss and squelch, as though from a radio tuner. But the film is not narrowing in on some clear channel; the hiss and the squelch—the sound of the atmosphere itself—is the point. The voice-over provided by Ademi's son Dado informs the audience that his father "invented a kind of natural television which converted the music made by the Aurora Borealis into moving pictures. A kind of organic television using nothing but the night sky for his materials."⁵⁷ Ademi's daughter Selma's voice-over speaks of helping her father "interpret" the messages of the stars, and Ademi speaks of "the harvest, the collecting, the distillation" of the heavenly ethers, but this process remains uncertain and incomplete. Moreover, noise is never far away. Ademi intones, "Little images reacted with each other to make new ones. And those new ones reacted with the other ones to make images I'd never seen before. Scenes: Scenes of ourselves. Scenes of Canadians."⁵⁸ By adding scenes of a people, the Telemelodium's unintended noise becomes a new kind of signal, meaningful to Ademi and presumably to his subscribers, if not to the forces of the State. What Ademi says next—"I don't know how but the

Telemelodium acquired a mind of its own"⁵⁹—draws on the long melodramatic tradition (going back to at least *Frankenstein* [1818]) of depicting technology as a force beyond conscious human control.

The film signals the transgressive potential of the Telemelodium's emergent images with a characteristically melodramatic motif: incest. Images of Ademi's adult daughter Bojanna, nude from the waist up, begin to appear in the ongoing flickering montage. Ademi's even, near-monotonous voice-over describes this euphemistically as "just as she was the day she was born," but there are no images of infants—only of coy poses by a voluptuous woman. "This seemed very wrong at first," he continues, "but then I thought, 'She's Canadian now, so let the country see her this way, if that's what they wish, and that's what the Telemelodium wishes.'"⁶⁰ At this moment, the Telemelodium becomes an engine that generates melodrama exactly according to Maddin's definition of it: the truth uninhibited. Ademi disavows any responsibility for the creation of these images, or desire for them, by displacing agency onto the Telemelodium and his fellow Canadians. *The Night Mayor* creates an impasse for the viewer, refusing to resolve the contradiction between Ademi's low-key narration and the images on screen. The truth that the film presents is not that Ademi is an old pervert or that Canadian media audiences are hungry for prurient content or even that media technologies are rampaging out of control. The truth that *The Night Mayor* presents is the ongoing impossibility of a national cinema sophisticated enough to be capable of regularly and openly depicting such deadlocks. What this segment foreshadows is the eventual government seizure of the Telemelodium itself.

In relationship to the rhetoric of globalization, imaginary media can play a critical role, indicating that there have always been, and will continue to be, alternatives to the discourse network that neoliberal apologist Thomas L. Friedman smugly refers to as the "golden straightjacket."⁶¹ In Žižek's terms, imaginary media are virtualities that are inherent to the past but betrayed by their actualization;⁶² ransacking the real and imagined past for inspiration for such virtualities is part of what will enable something new to occur. Thus, from Zielinski's perspective, the main scholarly purpose of considering imaginary media of various sorts is "to counter current tendencies towards standardization and universalization in the interest of a uniform global market with the rich variety of variants offered by bygone eras."⁶³ Picking through the archives for examples of dead, failed, impossible, or other forms of imaginary media that might be remobilized can instill, as Bruno Latour observes, "the troubling and exhilarating feeling that things could be different, or at least that they could still fail."⁶⁴

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, Maddin's *Telemelodium* is just such a mobilization of the imaginary potential of an actual device: Thaddeus Cahill's *Telharmonium*, US patent 580035, filed 10 August 1895, granted 6 April 1897.⁶⁵ The prototype *Telharmonium*, built at Holyoke, Massachusetts, was enormous: over 60 feet long and weighing 200 tons, its composition included 145 inductor alternators and a ten-section switchboard with over 2,000 switches.⁶⁶ A second version of the instrument was positively compact by comparison, at only 14 feet long.⁶⁷ Just as in Maddin's version of it, the *Telharmonium* would operate over the telephone wires; by 1891, concerts broadcast over the telephone wires were fairly common, and some examples, such as the Paris *Théâtrophone*, survived past the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ (This is one example of the early, now-vanished telephonic practices that Martin mentions.) Though it delivered music, not images, Cahill imagined that one such machine would easily be able to service ten thousand subscribers.⁶⁹ The rhetoric of Thomas Commerford Martin, a journalist who wrote a piece on the instrument in 1906, is saturated with the era's belief in the nation-building power of electronic communication: "Electricity has been the greatest centralizing, unifying, force these hundred years, and the 'tie that binds' is distinctively made of wire."⁷⁰ Martin's breathless rhetoric leaves no doubt that this electromechanical behemoth's music will be the harbinger of a utopian political future: "In the Cahill *telharmonium*," he enthuses, "we enter a pure democracy of musical electrical waves," followed, a few sentences later, with the reassurance that "[t]his all reads wildly extravagant, but it is the cold statement of a bald fact."⁷¹ Nor were these isolated sentiments; Ray Stannard Baker, another journalist, also saw the *Telharmonium* as a means to finally democratize music.⁷² Although this may have been conceivable on the side of the audience, Reynold Weidenaar, the author of the only book-length scholarly study of the *Telharmonium*, observes that it "must have been one of the most hair-raisingly complicated instruments to play in all the history of music."⁷³

In 1905, Cahill had signed a contract with the New York Telephone Company to use its conduits and telephone poles; by July 1906, the *Telharmonium's* trunk wires were being strung alongside those of the regular telephone lines,⁷⁴ and transmissions were tested over regular phone lines running to the southern tip of Manhattan.⁷⁵ On 26 September 1906, at *Telharmonic Hall* on 36th Street in Manhattan, the first *Telharmonium* concert was performed for the nine hundred members of the New York Electrical Society,⁷⁶ and, by 9 November, one of the city's most prestigious French restaurants, the *Café Martin*, was piping in the *Telharmonium's* music . . . to a decidedly mixed reception.⁷⁷ In early 1907, Mark Twain,

who claimed to have been the first home telephone subscriber, ordered the first home Telharmonium subscription.⁷⁸

In several documented cases, individuals and institutions decidedly uninterested in receiving the Telharmonium's music complained that it was interfering with both wired and wireless communication. One experiment with broadcasting the Telharmonium's music wirelessly resulted in a complaint by the chief electrician in charge of the wireless station for the Brooklyn Navy Yard that the music was blending in with naval orders.⁷⁹ During testing of the Telharmonium in Holyoke, people had complained about interference disrupting telephone service.⁸⁰ In New York City, these complaints escalated beyond accusations that the Telharmonium music was disrupting business conversations to accusations that it had "threatened to break up families" when at least one suspicious wife accused her husband of being at a theater rather than working late at the office.⁸¹ Further, the Telharmonium's backers had accumulated an enormous debt from running Telharmonic Hall and making franchise payments to the city, and there was no money to add new lines to reach new customers, so what had begun as a promising venture was padlocked and abandoned.⁸²

Cahill retreated to Holyoke in 1908 to build a third and final Telharmonium, but, when he eventually returned to New York City to demonstrate it in 1910,⁸³ he faced stiff competition from companies like Wurlitzer, who were building their own contraptions for broadcasting music.⁸⁴ Between 1914 and 1918, the Telharmonium and its various backing companies died a slow, lingering death, and Weidenaar speculates that the machine's remnants were likely sold for scrap when the offices were finally vacated.⁸⁵

The Telharmonium's history, which is a story of lost fortunes and missed opportunities, is melodramatic enough on the factual level. By virtue of its contact with its fictional cousin in Maddin's film, the story takes on the status of urban legend, as this line from Erik's Morse's piece "Guy Maddin and the Origins of Muzak" (2009) demonstrates: "As rumor went at the time, a gaggle of blood-thirsty executives, angry at the constant phone interruptions, destroyed the monstrous instrument and threw the remains into the Hudson River."⁸⁶ Given the size and weight of the Telharmonium's components, this seems unlikely. In any event, no such account appears in Weidenaar's book; an earlier version of the Hudson River story is in Mark Sinker's article "Leon Theremin: Singing the Body Electric," which also erroneously identifies Cahill as a Canadian.⁸⁷ The account grows more melodramatic as bits and pieces of it reverberate around the Internet, due in large part to the popularity of Maddin's work.

Aided and abetted by networked digital media's characteristic tendency to transform fact into factoid by stripping off most forms of citation and attribution, present fictions reach into the past and reconfigure the way that we interpret the historical record.

To what extent is it possible to imagine such reconfigurations as productive? Fredric Jameson argues that systemic, cultural, and ideological closures have created a "constitutional inability" within us to imagine utopia:⁸⁸

The desire called Utopia must be concrete and ongoing, without being defeatist or incapacitating; it might therefore be better to follow an aesthetic paradigm and to assert that not only the production of the unresolvable contradiction is the fundamental process, but that we must imagine some form of gratification inherent in this very confrontation with pessimism and the impossible.⁸⁹

Maddin's use of imaginary media rather than actual media does not represent irrationality, but something that is affectively true without being factually accurate. This is both Maddin's personal definition of melodrama and the creed that Nihad Ademi espouses at several points in *The Night Mayor*: "Mine is a peculiar truth which comes from the false."⁹⁰ Again, we could turn to Žižek's theorization of the Imaginary here: we use fantasy as a support for our construction of reality, not as its antithesis.⁹¹ What makes Ademi interesting as a character, and makes *The Night Mayor* interesting as a film, is that they traverse the fantasy to present the irresolvable antagonism at their cores; their successes and their failures are inextricable from each other.

One way to assess *The Night Mayor* in terms of the trajectory of Maddin's larger project is through Raymond Williams's dialectic of the residual, the dominant, and the emergent. By repurposing the half-forgotten residual forms of early melodrama for his own purposes, Maddin attempts to fashion an emergent cinema that requires his audiences to consider the contexts through which his film circulates and how that process of circulation transfigures our notion of film" itself. As Williams points out,

"[I]t is never a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form. Again and again what we have to observe is in effect a *pre-emergence*, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named.⁹²

The ending of *The Night Mayor* is nothing if not ambiguous, which makes the notion that the vision it presents is pre-emergent a useful one. The final segment of narration finds Ademi pondering the music of the whales and whether their music “could be made into pictures as well. Safe pictures. Honest pictures of ourselves which won’t bother anyone.” Following a squelch in the sound track, the film flickers to black and, then, for only a fraction of a second, too brief to see without the aid of the ability to pause and advance frame by frame, is the image of a Manitoba Pool grain elevator:⁹³ as endangered as the whales but also a synecdoche for the utterly safe cinema of Canadiana that Maddin so often states he despises.⁹⁴ Against such images, Maddin’s films constitute the pre-emergence of a differential digital cinema that both thematizes (via imaginary media) and embodies (via glitches and other effects of the Real) a potentially resistant set of cultural practices . . . but the cultural cliché still makes the final appearance. Here, as elsewhere, emergence is an ongoing process. History is a beginning, not an end.

Darren Wershler is the Concordia University Research Chair in Media & Literature (Tier 2) and the co-Director of the Concordia Media History Research Centre. His most recent academic monograph is Guy Maddin’s My Winnipeg (University of Toronto Press, 2013).

NOTES

1. Darren Wershler, *Guy Maddin’s My Winnipeg*, Canadian Cinema, vol. 6 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).
2. Guy Maddin, dir., *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs; Archangel; The Heart of the World*, Guy Maddin Collection (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2002), DVD.
3. Guy Maddin, dir., with Gretchen Krich, Sullivan Brown, Maya Lawson, and Katherine E. Scharhon, *Brand upon the Brain! A Remembrance in 12 Chapters*, Criterion Collection, vol. 440 (New York: Criterion, 2008), DVD.
4. Guy Maddin, dir., *The Night Mayor* (Montreal: Office National du Film du Canada/National Film Board of Canada, 2009), film.
5. Melissa Than, “Guy Maddin Commemorates the NFB’s 70th Anniversary with *Night Mayor*,” press release (Montreal: Office National du Film du Canada/National Film Board of Canada, 2009), available at <http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/en/press-room/press-releases-media-kits/?idpres=19303>.
6. Telefilm Canada, “*Night Mayor*—Guy Maddin” (presentation, 60th Berlin International Film Festival, 11 February 2010).
7. Than, “Guy Maddin Commemorates.”
8. William Beard, “Maddin and Melodrama,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 2–17, quotation on 12.
9. Film Studies Program, Department of English, “Faculty Details: Guy Maddin” (Winnipeg: Faculty of Arts, University of Manitoba).

10. For an extended discussion, see Wershler, *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg*, 56–59.
11. Beard, “Maddin and Melodrama,” 12.
12. *Ibid.*, 11.
13. Quoted in Wershler, *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg*, 57.
14. *Ibid.*, 6.
15. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 14.
16. *Ibid.*, 13.
17. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 120–21.
18. Wershler, *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg*, 59.
19. Ken White, “Forget Your Desire: The Cinema of Guy Maddin,” in “Hybrids,” special issue, *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 45–46 (2006), available at <http://www.mfj-online.org/issues/mfj-no-45-fall-2006/>.
20. Tom McCormack, “Code Eroded: At GLI.TC/H 2010, RHIZOME, Oct 2010,” in *GLI.TC/H READER[ROR] 20111*, ed. Nick Briz, Evan Meaney, Rosa Menkman, William Robertson, Jon Satrom, and Jessica Westbrook (Unsorted Books, 2011), 15–21, quotation on 19, available at http://gli.tc/h/READERROR/GLITCH_READERROR_20111-v3BWs.pdf.
21. Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 44.
22. *Ibid.*, 44–48.
23. *Ibid.*, 296.
24. *Ibid.*, 12.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Eric Kluitenberg, *Delusive Spaces: Essays on Culture, Media and Technology*, Studies in Network Cultures, vol. 2 (Rotterdam: NAi, 2008), 165.
27. Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.
28. *Ibid.*, 13.
29. David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 43.
30. *Ibid.*, 171.
31. Eric Kluitenberg, ed., *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium* (Rotterdam: NAi, 2006).
32. Siegfried Zielinski, “Modelling Media for Ignatius Loyola: A Case Study on Athanasius Kircher’s World Apparatus between the Imaginary and the Real,” in Kluitenberg, *Book of Imaginary Media* (see note 31), 29–55.
33. Louis Althusser, “*Lenin and Philosophy*” and *Other Essays* (1968), trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 162.
34. Félix Guattari, “Balance-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines,” in *Chaosophy*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet, Foreign Agents (New York: Semiotext[e], 1995), 119–50, quotation on 138.

35. Kluitenberg, *Delusive Spaces*, 173.
36. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 98.
37. Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso Books, 2006), 6.
38. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 5–7.
39. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 15–17.
40. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35.
41. Kluitenberg, *Delusive Spaces*, 175.
42. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.
43. Serra A. Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market*, Cultural Spaces (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 16.
44. Maddin, *Night Mayor*.
45. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 164.
46. J. B. Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 1–20, quotation on 6.
47. Still image in Wershler, *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg*, 34.
48. Maddin, *Night Mayor*.
49. Michèle Martin, "Hello Central?" *Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 37.
50. *Ibid.*, 150.
51. Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90, quotation on 81.
52. Martin, "Hello Central?" 139.
53. *Ibid.*, 136–38. These uses included, but were not limited to, the transmission of sermons, drama, concerts, literary recitations and the news.
54. Maddin, *Night Mayor*.
55. Noah Shachtman, "Military Faces Bandwidth Crunch," *Wired Magazine*, 31 January 2003, available at <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/news/2003/01/57420>.
56. Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, New Autonomy Series (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1994), 25.
57. Maddin, *Night Mayor*.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*
61. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 101–11.
62. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, Thinking in Action (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12.
63. Zielinski, "Modelling Media," 54.

64. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88–89.
65. Thaddeus Cahill, Art of and Apparatus for Generating and Distributing Music Electrically, USA Patent 580035, filed 10 August 1895, issued 6 April 1897.
66. Thomas Commerford Martin, “The Telharmonium: Electricity’s Alliance with Music,” *Review of Reviews*, April 1906.
67. Reynold Weidenaar, *Magic Music from the Telharmonium* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 66.
68. *Ibid.*, 17.
69. Martin, “Telharmonium.”
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Ibid.*
72. Weidenaar, *Magic Music*, 78.
73. *Ibid.*, 117.
74. *Ibid.*, 83.
75. *Ibid.*, 124.
76. *Ibid.*, 121.
77. *Ibid.*, 125.
78. *Ibid.*, 142.
79. *Ibid.*, 178.
80. *Ibid.*, 55.
81. *Ibid.*, 136.
82. *Ibid.*, 223.
83. *Ibid.*, 232.
84. *Ibid.*, 245, 248.
85. *Ibid.*, 255.
86. Erik Morse, “Guy Maddin and the Origins of Muzak,” *Interview*, 9 October 2009, available at <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/guy-maddin-night-mayor-#>.
87. Mark Sinker, “Leon Theremin: Singing the Body Electric,” *Wire* 139 (September 1995).
88. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Cultural Studies (London: Verso, 2005), 289.
89. *Ibid.*, 84.
90. Maddin, *Night Mayor*.
91. Žižek, *Plague*, 10 et passim.
92. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Marxist Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 126.
93. Maddin, *Night Mayor*.
94. Wershler, *Guy Maddin’s My Winnipeg*, 32.