

## **Pre-Puberulent Inertia: Jeffrey Erbach and the Winnipeg Secession**

by Solomon Nagler

*“Among all things that can be contemplated under the concavity of the heavens, nothing is seen that arouses the human spirit more, that ravishes the sense more, that horrifies more, that provokes more terror or admiration to a greater extent among creatures than the monsters, prodigies and abominations through which we see the works of nature inverted, mutilated and truncated”<sup>i</sup>*

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In the mid 90's, a group of Winnipeg filmmakers resisted being swallowed by the patriarchs of Prairie Post-Modernism by hiding behind a bale of hay and launching a surprise attack, lopping off the patriarchs' testicles and dispelling them into the inferno created by stubble burning, an ancient pagan rite conducted by prairie farmers at the conclusion of every harvest. The *Winnipeg Secession*<sup>ii</sup> officially made their presence known with the infamous reaction garnered by Jeff Erbach's short film *Soft Like Me* (1996). A screening at the Vancouver International Film Festival yielded an almost riotous reception, during which festival programmer John Dippong narrowly avoided a lynching from a mob of agitated Canadian filmgoers expecting more laissez-faire lukewarm subtleties. According to Winnipeg Film Group lore, even the Village Voice took their shots when they reviewed the fifth annual New York Underground Film Festival and devoted nearly a third of their article to insulting Erbach and his work specifically. Together with films such as Gord Wilding's *Rapture* (1997) and Paul Suderman's *Brothers* (1998), the Winnipeg Secession's work resisted the post-modern prairie aesthetic that surged in the Winnipeg Film Group in the late 1980's, where awkward suburban angst and whimsical dream logic peripatetics reigned with the works of John Paizs, and later Guy Maddin.

Erbach's work in both feature and short film form places unique fantastical stories in the foreground of an infinite prairie landscape. Transgressive elements such as aberrant sexuality, meat joy and pederasty are masterfully integrated into a high contrast mise-en-scène. This style of mise-en-scène alone accounts for his meagre inheritance from his castrated forebears of the Winnipeg filmmaking torch; a use of saturated colours, an amplified sense of perfection exemplified in both the set and the performances of his actors, a solid sense of the frame and conspicuous modernist manipulations of camera movements and character blocking. The use of high contrast mise-en-scène was first introduced in the post-modern suburban angst films of John Paizs and was later picked up by the Cronus of the Winnipeg film scene, Guy Maddin, who extended it onto a self-referential manipulation of the celluloid material. Erbach's originality in both the Winnipeg and Canadian filmmaking context is in his use of landscape and his subtle deconstruction of the high contrast mise-en-scène by introducing transgressive elements that serve as allegory rather than traditional shock cinema effects.

Erbach was the first filmmaker from the Winnipeg Film Group to seriously integrate landscape as a significant narrative element in a film's dramatic structure, which seems particularly perplexing considering Winnipeg's geographical predicament. Until the Winnipeg Secession, most films from the city were preoccupied with surreal melodramas and self-conscious narrative oddities that amplified a heightened sense of artificiality in an economically depressed island city. Very rarely prior to Erbach's work did films produced through the Winnipeg Film Group (WFG) venture outside the Perimeter<sup>iii</sup> to

swim in the elusive ocean wilds of the prairie horizon. This represented a contrast to the films being made by the WFG's neighbour to the west, the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative. Under the guidance of Escarpment School member and former University of Regina professor Richard Kerr<sup>iv</sup>, Saskatchewan filmmakers Ian Toews, Mike Rollo, Dianne Ouellette and Jason Britski created unique landscape films utilizing the “Saskatchewan Stare” – disciplined, slow paced first person films that often employ long-take shots of the prairies, evoking the time and space of the prairie in the theatre. Ghosts and textured memories emerge metaphorically through static framed shots of the architectural constraints imposed by an endless sky.

Films such as *Soft Like Me*, *The Nature of Nicholas* (2002) and *Around Sanford* (2005) resist silent drowning observational shots of the imposing landscape. Rather, Erbach uses the dynamic contrast between human activity and the natural geography of the Great Plains to situate magic realist, transgressive stories that explore the permeation between either/or binaries of male/female, wild/cultivated, heterosexual/homosexual and tenderness/violence. The allegorical nuances in his breakthrough film *Soft Like Me* are stylistically amplified by a confident framing of the prairies' natural geographical elements such as the harsh light found in locales banished to Canada's upper latitudes and the inherent homogeneity of geometrically imposed croplands placed perfectly under a drowning sky. His cinematically seductive, macabre tale of a penal colony of young pre-pubescent boys indentured by an effeminate pederast landowner to harvest the Great Plain's bounty utilizes the transgressive shock inertia of meat joy and inappropriate touching to breach hegemonic notions of sexuality and identity. The inherent sense of mythos established in his films is augmented by his exploration of the lover-beloved dichotomy, often featuring a protagonist, an *eromenos* – an adolescent, pre-pubescent boy – who is the object of love of an *erastes* – an adult male.

The ambiguous in-between state of boys who are the object of amorous advances “*until body hair has sprouted and the beard becomes heavy*”<sup>v</sup> plays an important role in Erbach's exploration of hegemonic binaries, as has been done for centuries, as a means of uncovering ontological facts in the history of philosophy<sup>vi</sup>. In Erbach's mythological prairie pantheon, the inertial force of the *eromenos*' sexual ambiguity serves as an entry point, where he introduces transgressive gestures and hauntology to explore how people designated as boys are sexualized, *reaped* into the geometrical unity of a heterogeneously gendered society. Concerning the former, inappropriate massaging of boys' torsos with lard in *Soft Like Me*, boys kissing in *The Nature of Nicholas* and cannibalism in *Under Chad Valley* (1998) and *Soft Like Me*; and regarding the latter, the invocation of the demon in *The Nature of Nicholas* and *Around Sanford* and the apparition of the pre-pubescent girl in *Soft Like Me*. The explicitly socialized males in *Soft Like Me* are anonymous, dressed in a uniform of shirtless hairy backs peaking out of denim overalls, their bearded faces hidden by straw hats. It is they who aggressively reap the towering stalks of grain with a sickle, while the *eromenoi* ritualistically gather that which is cut, learning from the allegorically sexual act of exploiting Mother Earth's natural cycles, a metaphorical, industrial rape of the landscape. The adult males bring the *eromenoi* to the pederast landowner, initiating a master-slave relational dialectic that will serve to socialize his exploitative labour/sexual gestures.

Erbach's most accomplished work to date, *The Nature of Nicholas*, is a brilliant summary of his fantastical pantheon of sexual discovery and ontological hauntology that is evident throughout his filmography. Hauntology, a term coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 work *Spectres of Marx*, refers

to an ontological incantation to ghosts or spectres as a means of exploring logocentric anomalies that emerge when confronted with a blurring of presence and absence. We can find elements of Hauntology throughout the history of literature.<sup>vii</sup> Erbach uses hauntology to explore the elusive metamorphosis facing his *eromenoi* when socialized as either homosexual/heterosexual, or as man/woman. In *Soft Like Me*, the apparition of the girl represents the metaphysical possibility of transforming into a girl, an effeminate metaphorical liberty that will rescue the *eromenoi* from a life of exploitation in the master-slave cycle they have been trapped in. In *Around Sanford*, an androgynous ghoul is used as both a voyeur and amorous confidant for a sexually repressed farmer who suspiciously eyes a set of metrosexual newcomers that accidentally make their way into a rural farming community. In *The Nature of Nicholas*, the ghoul/zombie is used as an ontological object of othering, a physical manifestation of a dichotomy the doll-faced, sexually ambiguous boys encounter when they participate in a series of amorous gestures that establish a sexual sense of self.

In what sense is the term 'nature' used in the *The Nature of Nicholas*? The film focusses on young eromenos Nicholas' reluctant stasis, awkward gestures and self-reflexive stares, and on how his actions become a catalyst for a fantastical doubling, the emergence of a ghoul version of Bobby, Nicholas' boyhood playmate whom he 'mistakenly' makes the object of his amorous desires. We are interested in Nicholas' nature, the solidification of his sexual preferences according to his interactions with both the spectral and the actual. What is his nature? What is his essence? Can we see the solidification of his identity, his sexual preferences and his gender? These sorts of divisions necessitate a doubling, an othering. Nicholas' nature is heterosexual only if he is not homosexual; he is male only if he is not female. These dichotomies necessitate an other – a phantom to which he can verify his desires to solidify his identity – and in this way Erbach beseeches the phantom and integrates hauntology. Bobby the boy, Bobby the ghoul; Nicholas the boy, Nicholas the ghoul.

Nicholas' nature is explored through a series of pubescent tableaux, masterfully amplified through Erbach's confident manipulations in high contrast mise-en-scène. The film opens during the conclusion of the school year; Nicholas and Bobby escape from the confines of their perfectly aligned desks, into the 'natural' wilds of the surrounding prairie fields. Bobby flirts with heterosexual pubescent longings, convincing Nicholas to go to a party where a ritualistic game of spin the bottle is used to confirm proper sexual designations through boy-girl pairings. Nicholas' failure in the sacred space of the basement closet becomes the catalyst, a point of entry for Erbach's various phantoms: the doubling of Bobby and Nicholas into ghouls and the emergence of the spectre of his absent father. The first doubling occurs when Nicholas attempts to extend his newly acquired knowledge of sexual gestures onto Bobby. Having failed miserably at pubescent party tricks, Bobby comes to console Nicholas the following day in his esoteric secret shanty workshop, a space in the fields where Nicholas partakes in macabre examinations of various 'natural' entomological phenomena. Nicholas mistakes Bobby's boyhood consolations as affection, and he sneaks Bobby a kiss. Confused and disgusted, Bobby holds his hands in front of his lips and looks at Nicholas blankly, a gesture that is repeated throughout the film (perhaps an archaic sign of consigning Nicholas' desires to silence, to secrecy). This transgressive breach leads to Bobby's gradual transformation into a ghoul; a rotting other, an organic anomaly. The ghoul is found wandering the fields and is perpetually sick and stinking. Feeling sympathetic and responsible for the creation of this ghoul, Nicholas takes him home to nurture him, eventually becoming affectionate with him.

Nicholas soon discovers that Bobby's transformation was in fact a doubling when he observes the other unscathed Bobby playing baseball in an ocean of wheat. Bobby implores Nicholas to kill the abominate other – “just take him out to a field and leave him there”. Nicholas refuses, and spends the rest of the film protecting the ghoul from Bobby. Eventually Bobby finds his elusive other and disposes of him, carrying the ghoul's limp body into the wilds of the infinite prairie horizon. The absence of the aberrant object of his amorous advances becomes a catalyst for Nicholas' own metamorphosis into a ghoul. Nicholas' body starts to change, a diabolical pubescent transformation. He wanders into the middle of the night, collapses and leaks bodily fluid all over a freshly reaped field. He wakes up and his transformation is complete: we are left with Nicholas the ghoul. Yet where is his double? How do we dispose of the deviant other? Erbach focuses the audiences' point of view on the emergent demon as he walks back home, eventually discovering his double sleeping soundly in his bed. The camera stays on the point of view of the demon and we look longingly together with him onto the distant object of normalcy. Who will make the necessary demarcation of the legitimate 'nature' of Nicholas? Enter the spectre of the father.

Before the fateful entrance of the spectre of his father, Nicholas would often look longingly at his army uniform hidden at the back of his closet. Erbach integrates hauntological principles in order to evoke an omniscient heterosexual gaze, one that pushes for a solidification of the nature of Nicholas, an elusive play of presence and absence that serves to assimilate Nicholas into a hegemonic binary system of sexuality and gender. Derrida explains the omniscient nature of the spectre as a gaze that is always fixed on us, “...we feel ourselves looked at by it, outside of any synchronicity, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority...”<sup>viii</sup>. The spectre is a revenant, whose comings and goings are beyond our control<sup>ix</sup>, appearing often as an illuminating moment of self-realization. Erbach beseeches the spectre after pivotal breeches in Nicholas' attempts to discover his true nature.

Nicholas' father first emerges as a flashback after the failed spin the bottle consummation, once the fateful girl, having faked sexual interaction by ruffling their hair and smearing her make-up on his face, had fled the space. Nicholas stays in the closet alone, contemplating his inadequacy. A breech has occurred – self loathing, a sense of absence and failure – *Enter the Ghost*. Nicholas discovers that his father has been voyeuristically watching the entire incident behind a set of clothes. His father is unable to communicate; instead, he just stares silently at his son, dressed only in long-johns, stripped of his military uniform. His second appearance is at home, screaming over a sleeping Nicholas after he has kissed Bobby. Again his voice is silent; his screams leave no trace. He has been castrated into a voyeuristic, omniscient state of stasis.

The spectre of Nicholas' father is finally able to communicate through the penetration of those around him. Clad in his discarded uniform, he enters his mouthpiece either through existing orifices or an incision. The first instance of which occurs when Nicholas is introduced to his mother's perspective beau, Roy. As Nicholas' mother puts the finishing touches on their introductory dinner, Roy and Nicholas sit alone in the living room to have a heart-to-heart. Suddenly, a bump appears in the couch, moving unbeknownst to Roy towards his anus. After sound cues reveal penetration, Roy begins to question Nicholas about his attraction to Bobby in a voice that is not Roy's own. The spectre's fascinating puppet play attempts to lure Nicholas into an Oedipal crisis, a crucial engagement as Nicholas discovers a sexual sense of self. His father makes another speaking appearance later in the

film, this time through Nicholas' mother. Instead of entering through her anus, the spectre enters through an incision he has made on her back. Once again he begins interrogating Nicholas, this time about Bobby's double. "I know about your friend... How does that make you feel?", the ghost asks, intending to evoke shame and disgust in the boy for his attraction to the sickly ghoul hiding under his bed, trying to straighten him out.

The father's own voice emerges only after Nicholas himself has doubled. Addressing only the sickly ghoul, his tone is surprisingly conciliatory. Following his transformation, Nicholas the ghoul returns home to discover a perfectly healthy Nicholas sleeping peacefully in his bed. Turning around he finds his father, watching the healthy boy sleep, concealing his ghostly body with that of his decaying son. Silently, Nicholas follows his father out of the house and into the drowning predawn sky and endless fields. He follows him into one of many timeworn shacks that dot the prairie horizon, abandoned and written on by climactic extremes. The dark interior looks surprisingly like his own home, only faded and falling apart. Left alone in the shack, he discovers a younger boy blanketed by spider webs, covering his eyes, whimpering to himself in the corner (is this another ghoul? Perhaps a younger version of Nicholas?). He walks down an ill-lit hall into a bedroom where he once again confronts his silent father and another boy/ghoul covered in cobwebs rocking back and forth in the corner. His father gestures to a bed, motioning for Nicholas to lay down. He ominously walks towards him, pulling the covers up to ghoul Nicholas' neck. Looking over to the corner, his father comments in a calm voice, "All in the past, it's just a part of growing up. There are a lot of little houses down this road". The camera leaves them and slowly floats outside the house into the infinite horizon that surrounds the shack. We discover that crumbling shingles on the roof have been formed to spell Nicholas' name. Consecrated by the presence of the ghouls and the actions of their father, the shack becomes a sacred shanty where the elusive extras of conformity are discarded and the other senses of self, victims of time, are frozen in time.

At the same time, there is also another 'nature' revealed in the *Nature of Nicholas*, through Erbach's fascinating use of in-between spaces: the mystical ruinous shacks that house the spectres of childhood and the secret shanty where Nicholas undertakes his entomological experiments. These ruined spaces were once part of the metaphorical Canadian fortresses that guarded us from the unknowable landscape, a clear division between human endeavours and the embracing indeterminable surroundings. Their time worn essence and the way daylight leaks between exposed wood walls reveal that nature is winning, and in fact that it has won. Erbach's innovation as a filmmaker lies in his brilliant use of the tensions inherent in the fortress/unknowable landscape dichotomy (a theme common in Canadian Cinema<sup>x</sup>) to augment his allegorical tales of sexual identity and gender.

Erbach's emphasis on the dynamic wildness of the Great Plains starts off at the beginning of the film with a reconfiguration of the school calendar. Instead of unleashing the students into the spring's freshly sowed fields, Erbach surrounds his film with glorious golden stalks of wheat, which are more common at the end of Summer. There is a constant contrast between this wild dramatic landscape and sacred, enclosed spaces (the spin the bottle closet, his father's hidden uniform in Nicholas' closet). Pivotal moments in the film's narrative structure occur when the line between landscape and fortress become breached. The forceful permeation of the fortress/landscape dichotomy is made evident through the film's major turning point, kissing Bobby, which occurs in Nicholas' sacred in-between space, the shack outside his house where he conducts his morbid insect dissections. The unknowability,

uncontrollability of nature seeps through the ruined edifice that once aimed to keep nature out. Nature breaches heteronomous categorization. Nicholas is transgressing while light pours through the cracks in the wall.

The doubling of Bobby and Nicholas also occurs outside, in the thick embrace of endless land and sky. The ghouls are organic and smelly, in a state of becoming, walking composts. Their green skin, shredded clothes and rotting smell represent something dynamically contrary to their healthy, heterosexual doubles with their perfectly sculpted hair and starched shirts. Nicholas' newly minted, heteronomous body eventually moves away from the unknowable Great Plains, into the confines of the city with his mother and Roy. We can no longer see the downing sky as he walks to his first day at school. He is surrounded by rows upon rows of houses rather than fields, the trees are perfectly manicured. He looks over to a group of girls playing, ready to assume his role as a heterosexual male. The camera freezes; we watch as Nicholas walks confidently towards the school. The spectre of his father suddenly enters the frame studiously behind him, instruments in hand, ready to ensure that his son follows the clearly marked straight and narrow path.

Alone on the Great Plains, we are presented with an environment that yields an amplified sense of our bodies; the surrounding emptiness offering absolute awareness of all our fleshy parts. All we have is our bodies, all we have is this great nothingness in which to explore our sense of self. Jeff Erbach used this setting to create innovative, fantastical allegories of pubescent inertia. Yet, the transgressive howls of the Winnipeg Secession eventually petered out, with many of Erbach's comrades burying their castration knives in the spring's freshly sowed fields. Subsequently, more radical experimental techniques at the Winnipeg Film Group emerged. Picking up the discarded tools of the Secession, we reassessed narrative approaches by scrapping away at the celluloid material to uncover the truth behind the alchemical texture. We are thankful to the Secession for providing the necessary, albeit weathered, tools.

## END NOTES

- i. George Bataille quoting from Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires Prodigieuses*, published in 1561 in “Deviations of Nature” *Visions of Excess Selected Writings, 1927-1939. (Translated by Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1985).*
- ii. Up to this point, they have been referred to as “The Sensationalists of the 90's” and have been published on a compilation DVD of short films by the Winnipeg Film Group. Because of the transgressive, aesthetic breaches made by filmmakers such as Jeff Erbach, Gord Wilding, Paul Suderman and Noam Gonick, I believe the term “Secession” is more appropriate.
- iii. A highway that serves as a border between the City of Winnipeg and the Great Plains.
- iv. The Escarpment School were a group of filmmakers who studied in the 1970s with Canadian Filmmaker Rick Hancox at Sheridan College in Ontario. Other members include Phil

Hoffmann, Gary Popovich and Steve Sanguedolce.

- v. Percy, William A. *Pederasty and pedagogy in Archaic Greece* (University of Illinois Press, 1996), 8.
- vi. See Plato's discussion in Protagoras (309 B) where Socrates initiates the dialogue by asking an anonymous interlocutor "...I thought you were an Admirer of Homer, who says that youth is most charming when the beard is first blooming- which is just the stage Alcibiades is at". "Protagoras" in *Plato Complete Works* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).
- vii. Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx. Translated by Peggy Kamuf* (New York; Routledge, 1994), 18. Derrida initiates his discussion of Hauntology by evoking Hamlet's "Time is out of Joint" idiom when confronting a ghost.
- viii. Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx. Translated by Peggy Kamuf* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.
- ix. Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx. Translated by Peggy Kamuf*, New York: Routledge, 1994), 11.
- x. This trend is brilliantly explored in Bruce Elder's, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989).