

GUY MADDIN

**COWARDS**  
**BEND THE KNEE**



INTRODUCTION  
**SHAME! GUILT!!**

PHILIP MONK

**THE AUTHENTICITY OF** an autobiographical recounting is guaranteed, we think, by some abject confession — as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's admission of the "dangerous supplement" of onanism that leads young men to the excesses "that eventually imperil their health, their strength, and sometimes their lives." The excesses of Guy Maddin's *Cowards Bend the Knee* is predicated on such confession, for the film treatment published here — which accompanies a peephole installation of ten short films gathered under the same title — is an autobiography: his **LIFE!** This life is no less imperilled by a weakness that the author identifies as cowardice — three times over!

We suspect, of course, that for the distance of reminiscence, Maddin has substituted the distancing of fiction. While the protagonist shares his name, the film, however, is set in the thirties, before Maddin was born. Although they were formative influences on the artist, hockey and hairdressing are an unlikely plot pairing for a film. We do know that Maddin's mother and his aunt Lil ran a beauty salon, behind which the family lived, and that his father was general manager of the Winnipeg Maroons hockey team. As for the abortions, abandoned families, incest, competitive romancing between father and son of younger women, and the pervasive lying and secrecy of the hero of the film, we can only — shockingly! —

guess. Is it all embellishment, or are the excesses of the story signs of a cowardly weakness and corrosive rot in its author, who behind the screen of fiction is confessing? — but not for the first time!

For a filmmaker like Maddin, who, according to him, has lived longer in the twenties than the decade itself lasted, we should not be surprised to witness his autobiography portrayed through the history of film. The stylistic references of *Cowards Bend the Knee* conflate the chronological development of film from the silent era through thirties comedy to *film noir*. A *noir* hockey film, it stands to its genre something like the 1946 violin movie *Humoresque* starring Joan Crawford and John Garfield, only without the sound. Traversing film history, *Cowards Bend the Knee* passes from the determinism of silent film, where the world is evil, to the implicated guilt of *film noir*, where we all are evil.

Perhaps this is why Maddin parcels out a little of this guilt for us to share. He has installed this scenario of his life story behind a series of peepholes. Ten short films play behind ten peepholes. In general, a peephole opens onto another world, satisfying both curiosity and perversity of the mysteries of adulthood or the banalities of sex. The peephole is also the camera lens, substituted in film by the iris shot; the world here is Maddin's fantasy excoriation of the dissembling depths of his soul. He candidly offers us this intensely microscopic look, and like avid tabloid readers, we respond, jumping from peephole to peephole seeking the thrill of his namesake's latest scandalous behaviour. Maddin satisfies our depraved curiosity but not without cunningly making us, at the same time, assume a compromising position. In spying on his world, we must turn our backs on ours, bend a little and expose our posterior for others to view. The bended knee is no gallant's gesture, but it is not Maddin's cowardly burden alone. It is a shame we share. Shame on us too! We are all cowards!