

Graeme Patterson's *Monkey & Deer*: an Evolutionary Fable

Part 1: The Flora and Fauna of Woodrow

Graeme Patterson's 12-minute animated film, *Monkey and Deer* is central to the understanding of the underlying narratives of his installation, *Woodrow*. Woodrow, Saskatchewan, is a real place and the Patterson farm, built by his great-grandfather, is currently the artist's home and studio. *Woodrow*, Patterson's installation of buildings, animations and video projections, is a metaphor of collective memory, relationships and dreams and their concrete manifestations in the built environment. *Monkey and Deer* can be shown as a stand-alone artwork and is also included in *Woodrow*, screened on a tiny TV set in *The House*, a dilapidated building representing the Patterson farmhouse. *Monkey and Deer* is a somewhat maudlin tale of trials and friendship, combining the temporal with the symbolic, familiar to us as a version of the mythic quest narrative. Patterson constructed the mis-en-scene, what he calls a 'Prairie Landscape,' as a grassy area, partially surrounded by barbed wire, a grain elevator, a partially collapsed shed, a tree, and an overturned International tractor. This landscape contains *The Elevator*, *The Barn*, *The Church* and *The Hockey Rink*, which cross-reference Patterson's sculptures in the installation, creating a layered, mirror-like circularity that suspends reality. Patterson also employs this circular structure in his film, linking the sets and action at the beginning and end of the film. The action takes place at night; contributing to an uncanny dream-like quality, a place of eternal return and departure. Within this filmic structure, protagonists move from one building and adventure to another while changing sets are signalled by an anomalous subway train crossing the screen, and by the artist's sound track that alternates from wistful 'spaghetti western' nocturnes, to a creepy calliopelike tune, to Euro-synth and back again.

The film begins with a close-up of barbed wire and landscape, and Deer

emerging from the ruins of the shed to investigate the overturned tractor, symbols respectively of Nature and Cultural decline. Deer runs into *The Elevator* where Patterson's grandfather is working on ladder. As waltz music plays, Monkey appears. A comical, mischievous and possibly malevolent creature with claw-like feet and ratty fur, he can be seen as the antithesis of Deer's gentler 'nature'. Patterson has suggested that, "maybe I am the Monkey,"¹ an identification with the Monkey's anomalous appearance in a prairie setting and Patterson's role as an artist in *Woodrow*. Deer lies down on the elevator floor and Monkey climbs on his back and is thrown off, the first in a series of tentative overtures, rejections and compromises between them. Monkey reappears wearing a curious crown of small interlocking gears, a talismanic object referencing Patterson's grandfather's machine shop, a metonym of the Monkey's vitality, and by implication, the artist's inspiration and connection to the monkey as a trickster, imitator, and creator of illusory fantasy worlds exemplified in the adage, "art is the ape of nature."

Both figures skitter about in the Gothic gloom of *The Elevator*. The action, signalled by the train and Techno music changes to the church where Monkey plays the organ, rides Deer, who throws him, and then follows as the crown falls down an organ pipe. The train appears again and they go to *The Barn* where Monkey performs an acrobatic dance routine on the stage. The crown falls into a hockey rink where a game is underway. A hilarious interlude follows when the crown becomes a puck in a hockey game where Deer seems to intervene on behalf of the monkey. The crown mysteriously reappears in the elevator, falling in pieces to the ground. The wistful tune returns and Deer climbs on the tractor

¹ Conversation with the author, July 2006. Interestingly in *Waiting for Ignacio*, a short animated collaboration by Patterson and Uruguayan artist Ignacio Iturria set at the Drake Hotel in Toronto, Patterson has cast himself as a mischievous Raccoon while Iturria plays himself.

and looks at the elevator, while Monkey, Nosferatu like, climbs down the elevator and dejectedly contemplates the broken pieces of his crown. Following Deer, he climbs the tractor, then the tree and, in a climactic tragic moment, falls into the shed and seems to die. In a tender sequence, Deer picks Monkey up on his antlers, takes him out of the shed and licks and nudges him. Monkey is revived and Deer picks him up on his horns, an action that resolves the conflict between them. They repeat the sequence of actions at the beginning, and, after looking up at *The Grain Elevator* that says 'Woodrow,' ride off together, presumably to share an eternal friendship.

2. Empire And Dust

Patterson's animation and installation enfolds both the real and the mythic town of Woodrow in a complex web of emotions connected to childhood, memory and to the iconic structures that typified rural life in Western Canada, bracketed by the British Empire of the late 19th century, when the settlement of the Canadian West reached its peak, and the emergence of global economy, that seems to signal its decline. For those who have experienced rural life on the Canadian prairies, the disappearance of these iconic structures, and the culture and objects of the people who lived in them, induces a contemplative and bittersweet state; compounded in part of regret, nostalgia, resignation and silence. This state, particularly in the setting of the vast horizons of the prairie, is clearly related to the 18th century concept of the sublime and its moralistic narratives of progress and decline, nature vs. civilization, exemplified in the passing of empires, ruined monuments and vast periods of time. These images are at the core of the conceptualization of the sublime in the works of Romantic writers and artists like Coleridge, Shelley, Turner and Thomas Cole. While referencing an aesthetic of ruin, Patterson's work is distanced from the sublime and perhaps even negates it through a clearly ironic, humorous, slapstick and irreverent treatment. The co-efficients of passing time and decay in his work are countered by repeated references to filmic tropes at once touching and grotesque. His 'puppets,' constructed of wire, rubber, fur and ink, are curiously crude, grotesque

mutants who move erratically through abject and gloomy structures that recall Expressionist or Grade B horror movies rather than classical civilizations. This creepiness is abetted by the nature of stop-time animation, which, while suspending disbelief, constantly returns one to the clearly constructed nature of the signified figures, which seem out of synch with the normal perception of temporal progression. While inspired by his memories of Woodrow and his Grandfather's, uncle's and father's stories, Patterson's recreation of *Woodrow* is a phantasm, a simulacrum ghost town, and a double mirror that reflects backwards to the past and forward into the future.

Part 3: Monkey and Deer leave the farm to visit Albertopolis in London, England

In October of 2006, I had the opportunity to visit London to research the work of pioneer Saskatchewan artist, James Henderson, (1871-1955), whose paintings of the Qu'Appelle Valley in Saskatchewan are very much in the mode of the sublime landscape. My research took me to Kensington and the Reading Room of the Victoria and Albert Museum, adjacent to the Natural History Museum, completed in 1883, part of a complex called Albertopolis after Victoria's consort who was a major supporter of museums, science and art and their role in the edification of the teeming masses. The Museum is a cavernous Romanesque revival building with a grand exhibition hall with an arched metal beams and glass clerestory that creates dramatic vistas of alternating light and gloom that flows over the displays of skeletal remains of dinosaurs, primates in glass vitrines and a cross-section of a giant Sequoia trees with tags correlating tree rings with important dates such as the 'discovery of America' and the 'opening date of the museum.' Both the exterior and interior are covered with a buff-coloured terra cotta, which has resisted the smoke, a negative index of progress, of Victorian London. Inset into the façade and interior of building are terra cotta sculptures and bas relief plaques of animals and plants, most notably monkeys who clamber over corbels and arches and peer around pillars into the vast

spaces as if to ensure the continuance of their evolved ancestors, the humans and the grand and eternal British Empire. The Museum, in its very fabric and iconographic scheme, is a massive shrine to Darwinian evolutionary theory that, by implication, justified England's empire. The monkeys, frozen in stone, reminded me of Graeme's work and its wry commentary on place, time and memory and what *Monkey and Deer* might really mean. After all, the town of Woodrow was a creation of the British Empire and its concomitant narratives of cultural evolution, and concepts of moral superiority and social progress. The Pattersons, like other hardy enterprising pioneers, settled the Canadian West and acted out our own Canadian version of Manifest Destiny. The West and the 'Great Dominions across the seas', lead us inevitably back to England and to Empire.

At the end of the film, when Monkey and Deer ran past the grey ruins of the Woodrow elevator, perhaps they took a trip in time and ended up in London. There at night, when the museum is closed, one might imagine that they are discussing the state of things with the other animals permanently enshrined in stone. This is much grander than Woodrow, they say, where things are mostly wooden and are decidedly in need of repair. While in London, Monkey can meet with the other monkeys who slink around the building, their eyes ever open, always watchful. Perhaps they discuss how things have changed outside the building, how, like Woodrow, London's changed a bit. How people seem disinclined to naively believe in progress as they once did. How the Empire, while changed, is still somehow an active force, an idea. How strange it is that we are still fighting in Afghanistan and, even stranger, that just 200 kilometres north east of Woodrow, there is another ghost town in Saskatchewan called Kandahar? How those who were supposed to disappear in the wake of 'progress' have not, while the original settlers – all good subjects of the Crown, seem to have moved away or gone, and how at times there is an ominous silence that sometimes seems like a roar. Still it's good to see and talk to your friends once in awhile. These sentiments pervade Patterson's whimsical reinvention of the past and

speculation on the future through versions of their ruins. In some ways, *Woodrow* and *Monkey and Deer* are anti-museums of natural history that embrace decay and passing time, while emphasizing the fragility of our dreams and pretension, and sometimes our hopes. Patterson's *Woodrow* is not then a museum of curiosities but one of mirrors that reflect us back on to ourselves, where we become the curiosities, and where we might, once in a while, while peering around the columns and corners, find something to comfort and keep us warm while we wait for our immanent fate.

2 Dan Ring