

# La ironía en el trabajo cinematográfico del canadiense Guy Maddin

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## Resumen

Esta investigación analiza las claves significantes en la configuración de la ironía del discurso filmico de Guy Maddin bajo el enfoque semiótico greimasiano. Estos elementos están dados a través de los procesos textuales desconstructivos tales como la paradoja y el absurdo; y constructivos como lo son la parodia, lo grotesco, la alegoría y el humor. El corpus está conformado por la película *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003). Aquí se analiza la construcción del significado de la ironía con base en las oposiciones y semejanzas presentes en los efectos visuales y sonoros del mencionado film de este cineasta.

**Palabras clave:** Maddin, ironía, cine, semiótica, procesos textuales.

## Irony in the film work of Canadian, Guy Maddin

### Abstract

This research analyzes meaning keys in the configuration of irony in Guy Maddin's filmic discourse, using Greimas's semiotic approach. These elements are given through deconstructive textual processes such as paradox and the absurd and constructive processes such as parody, the grotesque, allegory and humor (Bravo, 1996). The basis of this corpus is the film *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003). This study analyzes con-

struction of the meaning of irony based on similarities and differences in the visual and sound effects in this film.

**Key words:** Maddin, irony, film, semiotics, textual processes.

## INTRODUCTION

The ironic vision comes from the same roots of modern culture. It breaks the boundaries of every day routine based on rigid presuppositions of reality and truth that guide human beings' way of thinking. This ironic vision states unexpected elements characterized by uncertainty, incongruence and senseless.

Irony can definitely be found in all Maddin's films: *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988), 72 mins., *Archangel* (1990), 90 mins., *Careful* (1992), 100 mins., *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997), 94 mins., *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002), 73 mins., and *The Saddest Music in the world* (2003), 99 mins. The latter will be taken for explaining the way irony is shaped on his works, and all the semiotic devices used to figure out significance considering this Canadian filmmaker's postmodern visual art.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Irony can be understood as an aesthetic evaluation by an audience, which relies on a sharp discordance between the real and the ideal, and which is variously applied to any texts and discourse. All the different senses of irony revolve around the perceived notion of an incongruity, or a gap between an understanding of reality, or expectation of a reality, and what actually happens, especially in what art concerns.

The artistic expression has always kept a complex relation of loyalty and disloyalty with reality: either it is subordinated to reality to become its most prestigious propagandist, or it snaps the ropes to show its shining capacities of creating own worlds. In this way, there are two trends that upsurge when dealing with art: deconstruction and reconstruction. These ones have lead on diverse **textual processes of irony**: a) **processes of difference** that refute reality, and open, at the same time, the possibility of impossible worlds, like the paradox and the absurd, and b) **processes of identity** that in a paradoxical confirmation of real things, create expressive possibilities and reconstructions of sense, in an atmos-

phere of resistance like parody and grotesque, allegory and humor (Bravo, 1996).

In this way, Guy Maddin, makes use of all these figures to create new ironic worlds based on critics, humor, parody and history in the postmodern era. According to Huchtheon (1989) “postmodernism is used to designate art forms which are fundamentally self-reflexive-art that is self-consciously art (...) it is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, with as much to do with the literary past as with the social present” (63).

Postmodernist writers’ primary strategy is to use language in a self-reflective, as opposed to self-effacing, fashion in order to demonstrate the operation of narrative codes in the constitution of meaning. It is a strategy which often results in word games which work to parody reality. So, this is what Maddin does throughout his films and it will be explained to you some steps ahead.

What postmodernism also invariably seems to signal is irony. Irony in two main senses: in a more formal sense, that is, as ironic intertextuality, or more simply, parody; and in a more ideological sense, in which the postmodern speaks using and abusing, inscribing and subverting at the same time the cultural dominants within which it unavoidably works. There are also aspects that do fit with postmodernist notions of pastiche, irony, playfulness, breakdowns of boundaries between art forms and between art and life.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The corpus of this research was one of Maddin’s films: *The Saddest Music in the World (2003)*. The *setting of this movie* was the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, city well known as the World Capital of Sadness. All the facts take place in 1933 when Great Depression was still occurring (1929-1939). So the atmosphere was full of restrictions, especially in relation to alcohol, lack of jobs, lots of immigrants and poverty. In relation to the plot, the baroness of beer, lady Port-Huntly announces a promotional international contest to find the saddest music in the world giving as a prize \$25,000 thousand to the winner. Two brothers (Chester Kent and Roderick) and their father (Fyodor) participate in the contest as well as lots of people from all over the world.

### 3. ANALYSIS

To begin studying the configuration of irony in this filmmaker's work, some verbal and visual fragments will be taken out from the film to be analyzed under the Greimas (1970) and Bravo's (1996) theories.

#### 3.1. Deconstrucción (differences)

##### 3.1.1. *Absurd*

It is the assumption of the world incongruence, contrary to all reasons or common sense. According to Aristóteles (1970), absurd can be achieved in two possible ways: as a breaking of the presupposition of casualty or as a suppression of any purpose. Any unusual cause or effect that breaks a presupposition in a "normal" situation is considered as and absurd fact. This breaking is also called a "rupture of isotopy", conceiving the term isotopy as "the permanence of contextual features, whose variations, instead of destroying the unity of the text, serve to confirm it" (Greimas, 1970:96). Let's take a look at some examples:

- **A heart in a small bottle** Roderick, well known as Gavrillo, The Great, one of the main characters who pretends to be a Serb, is considered the saddest violoncellist of the world. This is because his little son's death and his wife's abandon. As soon as his son dies, Roderick decides to take his son's heart and to keep it in a small bottle preserved in his tears liquid. To start with the semiotic analysis, I took the nuclear semes from the Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary (1989) and classemes contained in the main lexemes of the chosen statements. Nuclear semes are the smallest signifying units that let us identify a lexeme from another one (Greimas, 1970), while the classemes would correspond to the contextual semes emerged from the cultural experience of any subject. (Pottier in Blanco & Bueno, 1980).

##### **"Death":**

Semes: /ending+/failure/

Classemes: /grave+/mourning+/resignation+/oblivion/

##### **"Preserve"**

Semes: /maintaining+/perfect+/unchanged/

Classemes: /belonging+/caring+/affection/

**“Life”**

Semes: /being/+ /alive/+ /living/

Classesmes: /existence/+ /caring/+ /loving/+ /caring/

**“Tears”**

Semes: /drop/+ /salty/+ /water/+ /grief/

Classesmes: /sadness/+ /farewell/+ /love/

In this case, we have the opposite relation **death vs life** so the only way of maintaining his son perfect, unchanged on even alive, was through keeping his heart and suffering in the bottle full of his tears. As a consequence, the rupture of the isotopy lays on the lexeme “preserve”. If Roderick would have put his son into a grave, he would have ended with his suffering through oblivion and the spectator had had a “normal” death for his son.



Fig.1. Picture of Roderick holding the bottle with his son’s heart.

- **The love of the father & son for the same woman:** Fyodor (the father) and Chester Kent (the son) both fell in love with Lady Port-Huntley, the Baroness who calls for the competition. So if we take a look at the semes and classesmes of the lexemes “**father**” and “**son**” we find an opposition relation of values: **loyalty vs disloyalty, respect vs disrespect** that is configured in the love for the same woman. The rupture is based on the conditions of these lexemes especially in their classesmes, they both share: /respect/+ /loyalty/ which are meant the opposite /disrespect/+ /disloyalty/ in this relationship.

**“Father”**

Sememes: /male/+ /parent/+ /originator/

Classesemes: /authority/+ /obedience/+ /loyalty/+ /respect/

**“Son”**

Sememes: /male/+ /child/+ /descendant/

Classesemes: /respect/+ /loyalty/+ /respect/

We also face a similar situation between two brothers in this film: Chester and Roderick and Narcissa. This lady is Roderick’s wife and Chester’s lover.



Fig. 2. Picture of Helen, Chester and Fyodor.

- **Winnipeg, Capital of Sorrows:** Let’s analyze the following extract:

**Lady Port Huntley:** Listen to the sounds of Winnipeg. We are proud that Winnipeg has been chosen for 5 years by the London Times as the World Capital of Sorrows.

**“Proud”**

Sememes: /feeling/+ /satisfaction/+ /doing well/

Classesemes: /pleasure/+ /powerful/+ /famous/

**“Sorrow”**

Sememes: /feeling/+ /sadness/+ /loss/+ /disappointment/+ /regret/

Classesemes: /poverty/+ /unemployment/+ /hunger/

If we analyze the lexemes, there are not achievements to be proud of. Winnipeg is coming through The Great Depression. There’s poverty,

unemployment, prohibitions, lots of immigrants. So there is an opposition relation of **pride/sorrow** instead of **pride /joy**. According to Greimas' semiotics (Greimas & Courtés, 1990), the construction of meaning requires grasping similarities and differences at the same time. On the other hand, the rupture of isotopy in this opposition relation is given by the lexeme "proud" because of the value of its classemes /famous+/pleasure/ as a consequence of being the Capital city of "Sorrow" whose classemes are /poverty+/unemployment+/hunger/.

### 3.1.2. A paradox

It is an apparently true statement or group of statements that leads to a contradiction or a situation which defines intuition. Typically, the statements in question do not really imply the contradiction, the puzzling result is not really a contradiction, or the premises themselves are not all really true or cannot all be true together.

- **The competition:** the purpose of the competition was to choose the *saddest music* in the World and the fact that the contest is directly concerning to *beers*. Let's took the nuclear semes and classemes contained in the main lexemes:

#### "Beer":

semes: /drink+/alcohol+/barley+/fragrant/

classemes: /celebration+/party+/happiness/

#### "Sad"

semes: /melancholic+/sorrow+/grief/

classemes: /tears+/grief+/mourning+/alcohol/ +/depression/

#### "Competition"

semes: /event+/people+/enjoyment/

classemes: /strength+/powerful+/joy/

In this way, it is found:

#### **The saddest music vs beers**

/sorrow/ vs /happiness/

More precisely, this relation **/sorrow/ vs /happiness/** concerns to a contrary opposition. In this powerful and joyful competition related to Lady Port-Huntley's "beers" whose classemes are /celebration+/party/ +/happiness/, the winner would be focused on the *happiest* music and not on the *saddest* music. In this way, the rupture of the isotopy lays on "sad".

- **Aesthetic:** This film shot in black and white (b/w), excepting for a few scenes where a monochrome, different from black and white, is briefly shown. This filmmaker uses the technique of (b/w) of very early movies and only optical effects in spite of the use of innovating and colorful digital technologies to the visual effects of his works.

Color vs black & white

Digital effects vs Optical effects

Modern movies vs Old movies/

Color, digital effects, vs black & white, optical effects,  
sophisticated digital cameras      portable camera.

(MetroCinema, 2007)

So it is clearly observed that Maddin uses old techniques to make his movies in his own way but they are full of creative and optical effects as well as, reflective content that lay on irony and postmodernism within a Canadian culture.

The technique of postmodernism is to open up new readings by taking “old” elements, particularly elements associated with a dominant ideology, and situating them in a new, destabilizing context (Hutcheon, 1985).

### **3.2. Reconstruction (identity)**

#### *3.2.1. Parody*

Is a work that imitates another work in order to ridicule, ironically comment on, or poke some affectionate fun at the work itself, the subject of the work, the author or fictional voice of the parody, or another subject. As literary theorist Hutcheon (1985) puts it, “parody...is imitation with a critical difference, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (7). Another critic, Dentith (2000), defines parody as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (9). In this way cultural, social, and political movements can frequently be parodied.

The parodic text is a deconstructive writing: it denies and rejects the values of a model and, at the same time, it affirms and, even, honors that model.

- **The Canadian identity:** Maddin is dealing with his country’s lack of an explicit national identity through Chester and Roderick, and through this worldwide contest, Canada attempts to define itself strictly in the terms of other nations. “However, as the film’s ethnic representations remain strictly in the realm of stereotypes, Maddin is primarily concerned with the world’s perception of Canada, which is nearly non-existent (Hart, 2004). The major reason could be the record number of immigrants who came to Canada in the early 1900s. Immigrants have increased the population and had diversified the ethnic and linguistic composition of the country. Let’s take a look at some examples:

**Fragment A (Chester’s Identity)**

**Narcissa:** Well, he’s an American. (She refers to Chester)

**Fyodor:** You’re mistaken. He may have the sting of an American on him but I assure he’s a Canadian 100%.

**Narcissa:** You lied to me? (Talking to Chester)

**Chester:** No. It’s like I said, I’m a producer from New York, a real lying Yankee little boy.

**Fyodor:** and you are not son of mine. (Talking to Chester).

Chester was born and has lived in Canada all his life, however he pretends to be an American.

- **The Identity of Americans:** During the competition, Chester, the “authentic” American guy prowls the street, looking for poor foreign musicians he can recruit for nothing more than the promise for a ticket home (*American power*).

3.2.2. *Allegory*

It is sustained longer and more fully in its details than a metaphor, and appeals to imagination, while an analogy appeals to reason or logic. It can also be defined as fiction that represents an object, in a way of recalling an idea of another object. Modern allegory turns into the signs of balance among the negative forces of paradox, absurd, parody and grotesque.

Allegorical Nationhood: It is observed through:

- **The Maple Leaf** as a symbol of Canada in a scene in black and white where you can see Fyodor between two trees during a maple

leaves rain in a reddish image as an allegory of the Canadian flag. There is another scene during the contest in which Fyodor says: “I’m here to represent Canada. This is Canada speaking: *The Red Maple Leaf*”, while he is singing this song. So, symbols in here belong to the visual and sonorous plans of expression.



Fig. 3. Fyodor between the trees.

### 3.2.3. *Grotesque*

When used in conversation, **grotesque** commonly means strange, fantastic, ugly or bizarre, and thus is often used to describe weird shapes and distorted forms. In fiction, characters are usually considered **grotesque** if they induce both empathy and disgust. (A character who inspires disgust alone is simply a villain or a monster). Obvious examples would include the physically deformed and the mentally deficient, but people with cringe-worthy social traits are also included.

Modernity assumes the body with its negative aspects within aesthetic and the ugliness. The presupposition of beauty is rejected as a general aesthetic principle to be followed (Kristeva, 1988). In this way, aesthetics of a new era believes and promotes ugliness and grotesque as parts of human being.

- **The Amputation of Helen’s Legs:** The Baroness and Kent are hanging out in a car meanwhile she’s doing a blowing job to him. With the excitement, Chester loses the car control and crashes the car. The Baroness loses one leg and Fyodor, who is terrible drunk,

trying to help, cuts Helen's good leg. Helen appears without her legs until the middle of the film, then, she wears her new glass legs full of beer that Fyodor made for her to be forgiven and loved by her.

- **Teddy, the gigolo:** Teddy is an example of body corruption in the Great Depression Era. He is an employee during this difficult economical, social and political time, and needs to take care of his family so he decides to satisfy the Baroness' sexual desires. He is always in pajamas.

### 3.2.4. *Humor*

Humor is produced by a degradation of values that can be rebuilt at any time. To be fun, a man or thing must be related to a higher value. The higher value let a lower value turns into a degraded value. (Dentith, 2000: 75). This degradation of the universe values makes an atmosphere of superiority of "I" against the universe. Humor reveals itself in a *critical way* of amusement.

Irony is related to humor not to comedy. In this sense, comedy turns into an amusing spectacle, whereas humor critics what is degraded and incongruent. To understand a humorous statement, a person must be reflective and capable of discovering incongruence. This incongruence works with the well known rupture of isotopy or breaking of presuppositions (Plessner, 1941),

A comic can make people laugh but without any reflection whereas a humorist works based on incongruent statements making people critical trying to be more reflective and less comic. It is the humorist where the ironic conscience lives, the perception of the world and the human being, and intuition of belonging to different plans of existence. In this way, let's take a look at the following fragments:

**Narcisa:** Chester and Narcissa get on the bus and meet Fyodor, the driver and Chester's father.

**Fyodor:** Are you an American?

**Narcissa:** No, I'm not an American. I'm a **nymphomaniac**.

**Fyodor:** If you're not an American, you can be **whatever you like**.

**"American"**

Semes: /native/+ /citizen/+ /USA/+ /English/

Classesmes: /power/+ /money/+ /distinguished/+ /excellence/

### **“Nymphomaniac”**

Semes: /excessive/+ /uncontrollable/+ /sexual/+ /desire/+ /women/

Classesmes: /weird/+ /social/+ /rejected/+ /pleasant/

In this case, Fyodor cares about the importance of being American so if he does not mind anything else but this. As she is nymphomaniac (rupture of isotopy), he really does not matter. She keeps on being insignificant to him. She can have any other nationality or status.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Irony is the main theme found throughout Maddin’s work. The configuration of irony is developed through the textual processes of deconstruction and reconstruction where sex plays a very important role through grotesque aspects and humor. Besides this, this ironic film is considered a postmodernist one because it is critiquing the melodramatic genre and at the same time is part of it. Not only this, it also pushes the rules and changes the conventions it criticized. But as Maddin cleverly mocks those conventions, he performs the nifty trick of twisting them back into new melodramatic contortions. This filmmaker tries to make people reflect on their own reality and to claim for a way of engaging important elements of Canadian culture through his postmodern films.

Greimas’ opposition relations present in the visual and verbal discourse let us figure out the significance of this film, especially, in relation to irony, all the way through the analysis of the lexemes and its semes. When these semes can not provide meaning, it is necessary to look for classemes because social context does. At the same time, the isotopy created in the text is part of this meaningful process as well as its “rupture” creating new ways of conceiving art and enjoying humor and not just laughing at the screen.

Visual (images, optical effects and color), verbal (dialogues) and other sounds (music) play important roles when building up meaning for audiences from all over the world to conceive different ways of grasping not only Canadian reality and films but some others. In this way, Maddin shows the audience his country and at the same time, makes people think about the universal sense of nationhood with his film.

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