FILMING THE FOLK ARTIST-GENIUS: THE “DOCUMENTATION” OF MAUD LEWIS

by

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Abstract

In this thesis I critically analyze the ways in which the work of Nova Scotian artist Maud Lewis circulates within the categories of “fine art” and “Folk art” by examining three documentary films that deal with her life and work. My aim is to draw attention to Lewis’s current status in Canada as an artistic genius—an individual of seemingly exceptional talent who is also a Folk artist—that is, paradoxically, a “Folk artist-genius.” As vehicles through which to explore the construction of Maud Lewis and the concept of the Folk artist-genius I examine three films about Maud Lewis produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the National Film Board (NFB): The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis (CBC, 1965), Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows (NFB, 1976) and The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis (NFB, 1998).

Lewis exemplifies the qualities identified with the Folk, including geographic isolation, rusticity, simplicity, closeness to nature, industriousness and innocence. Yet, while she is thoroughly imbued with Folkishness, she is simultaneously viewed as the artist-genius, an individualized and mythologized character of sublime talent. Her originality, prodigy, virtuosity and spirituality are hailed as indicative of her genius, in the expression of which she is perceived to have overcome ordinary relations to the material world—social seclusion, physical disability and poverty. This thesis explores the paradoxical conflation of the concepts of the “Folk” and the “artist-genius” in the figure of Lewis, an under-analyzed yet superlative example of this phenomenon. Lewis, as Folk artist-genius, navigates between these two domains; she possesses the qualities of the traditional artistic “master,” but remains representative of the quintessential Folk, at once transcending and “typical” of the rustic Nova Scotian people. This is a seemingly impossible position to occupy; by the very definition of “Folk,” the concept of a “Folk artist-genius” should not exist, yet cultural institutions and agents unproblematically hail Lewis as such.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In this thesis I analyze the ways in which the work of Nova Scotian artist Maud Lewis circulates within the categories of “fine art” and “Folk art” by examining three documentary films that deal with her life and work. My aim is to draw attention to Lewis’s current status in Canada as an artistic genius—an individual of seemingly exceptional talent who is also a Folk artist—that is, paradoxically, a “Folk artist-genius.”

Although the art of Maud Lewis has received little scholarly attention, cultural agents such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) are drawn to Lewis as an exemplar of Folk culture. Her work—cheerful, bright, and colourful—portrays a romantic vision of a rural countryside in which farmers attend fields, fishermen row boats and even animals may display a hint of contented smiles. Her paintings represent the antithesis to everything the urban middle-class detests about modernity and hold for them a positive vision, albeit imagined, of a rapidly disappearing life and culture. Lewis herself seems to exemplify the qualities identified with the Folk, including geographic isolation, rusticity, simplicity, closeness to nature, industriousness and innocence. Yet, while she is thoroughly imbued with Folkishness, she is simultaneously viewed as the artist-genius, an individualized and mythologized character of sublime talent. Her originality, prodigy, virtuosity and spirituality are hailed as indicative of her genius, in the expression of which she is perceived to have overcome ordinary relations to the material world—social seclusion, physical disability and poverty. This thesis explores the paradoxical conflation of the concepts of the “Folk” and the “artist-genius” in

the figure of Lewis, an under-analyzed yet superlative example of this phenomenon. Lewis, as Folk artist-genius, navigates between these two domains; she possesses the qualities of the traditional “master,” but remains representative of the quintessential Folk, at once transcending and “typical” of the rustic Nova Scotian people. This is a seemingly impossible position to occupy; by the very definition of “Folk,” the concept of a “Folk artist-genius” should not exist, yet cultural institutions and agents unproblematically hail Lewis as such.

This thesis examines three films about Maud Lewis produced by the CBC and the NFB – The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis (CBC, 1965), Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows (NFB, 1976) and The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis (NFB, 1998) – as vehicles through which to explore the construction of Lewis and the concept of the Folk artist-genius.2 The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis was filmed as a part of the CBC television series Telescope, a program promising to examine the “‘Canadian image” by “zoom[ing] in on famous and fascinating Canadians living all over the world.”3 Airing regularly for ten years, this half-hour documentary program was initiated in 1963 and hosted by film writer and director Fletcher Markle. The episode devoted to Lewis is introduced and narrated by Markle, and features interviews with Lewis and her husband, footage of their home in Nova Scotia and images of her art. The second documentary I examine, Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows, is a short production of the National Film Board that promises to “celebrate… the life and work of one of Canada’s foremost primitive painters.”4 With a running time just over ten minutes, the film eschews the more expository, interview-focused format of Telescope and, instead, consists of narration and lyrical score combined with a series of still images – photographs of Lewis’s

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“charming paintings and the Yarmouth, Nova Scotia landscape they reflect.” The third and last documentary is a more recent production of the National Film Board. In its fifty minutes of running time, The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis “tell[s] Maud's whole story: from her carefree childhood, to the onset of the rheumatoid arthritis that would cripple her body and gnarl her hands, to the tragic story of the daughter she never knew she had.” The film was directed by documentary filmmaker Peter D’Entremont, and the script was written by Lance Woolaver, author of a book about the artist of the same title. The documentary blends narration, interviews, archival footage and images of Lewis’s work, and invites the viewer to “experience the beauty and simplicity of the paintings that gave meaning to her life.”

Before addressing the films described above, I begin in Chapter Two with a survey of relevant literature dealing with notions of the Folk and the artistic genius, as well as with work that addresses theoretical perspectives on the relationship between art and anthropology, particularly as they relate to the circulation of art, artifact and commodity within the Western system of classification. Chapter Three examines the representation of Lewis as an artist-genius and “master” through the lens of the three documentary films, demonstrating how her genius allows her to transcend everyday relations with the material world, including the banality of the Folk. Chapter Four shows how Lewis is presented at the same time as a member and an ideal representative of the Folk. The final chapter investigates the role of documentary film as a medium for perpetuating both traditional notions of the Folk and the paradoxical concept of the Folk artist-genius. I conclude by interrogating the general relationship of “Folk art” to “fine art”

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and by problematizing the circulation of artists and their work within these two categories.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The Folk and its Art

Anthropologists and historians agree on the fundamental characteristics of the Folk. Typically imagined as preindustrial peoples, the Folk are “the epitome of simple truth, work, and virtue – the antithesis of all that [is] overcivilized, tired, conventional, and insincere.” Historian Ian McKay’s description of the Nova Scotian Folk provides a good summary of the characteristics generally associated with the Folk, one that is geographically also relevant for this thesis:

[The Folk] lived, generally, in fishing and farming communities, supposedly far removed from capitalist social relations and the stresses of modernity… they were rooted to the soil and to the rockbound coast, and lived lives of self-sufficiency close to nature. The Folk and their lore were special and rare… the Folk were apparently peasants, telling old tales, singing old songs, making old crafts in traditional ways, living lives of quiet stolidity in centuries-old villages. They were most often ‘fisherfolk.’

It is the “urban cultural producers,” McKay continues, “pursuing their own interests and expressing their own view of things, [that] constructed the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything they disliked about modern urban and industrial life.” Indeed, Charles Keil, in his definitive article “Who Needs ‘the Folk’?” suggests that there “never were any ‘folk’ except in the minds of the bourgeoisie.” “Unlike ‘primitive,’” Keil explains,

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9 McKay, 26-29.
10 McKay, 4.
‘folk’ has only a positive, friendly meaning. The folk are not the oppressed whose revolution is long overdue, but the Quaint-not-quite-like-us, the Pleasant peasants, the Almost-like-me-and-you, to be consumed at leisure. The folk are not neutrals to be fought over by left and right. They belong to the bourgeoisie…

McKay echoes Keil’s argument in his description of the Nova Scotian Folk, contending that they were “simple, isolated, different: they were Other, and not ‘us.’” But despite the Othering of the Folk, McKay argues that they are perceived to be, paradoxically, “more ‘us’ than we ourselves, more essentially Nova Scotian (or Canadian), the last true products of our soil and the last authentic producers of our culture.”

Along with interest in the general concept of the Folk, art historians and anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to Folk artists and their apparent role as bearers of Folk culture. Recently, art historian Julia Ardery and ethnographer Gary Alan Fine have investigated the authentication process that goes on within the category of Folk art. Ardery focuses on American Folk artist Edgar Tolson and charts what she calls the “genesis” of Folk art in the twentieth-century, its coalescence as an artistic field especially in the period between 1965 and 1985, and the movement of Folk art into cultural institutions in the 1970s. She also addresses the social concerns expressed over the collection and fetishization of Folk art by middle-class...

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12 Keil, 265.
13 McKay, 26.
14 McKay, 28-29.
connoisseurs and museum curators. She argues that Western culture demands that Folk artists “be both more and less than ordinary people, that they enact the part of society’s losers and for that effort earn an abstract form of love…: publicity.” This situation is not, she concludes, the sole responsibility of contemporary or exploitive art collectors, but rather is “the fulfillment of art conventions two centuries old.”

Fine broadens Ardery’s theoretical scope, investigating the phenomena of categorization and boundary-creation within the field of Folk art, or as Fine calls it, “self-taught” art. He explores the authentication process, what is perceived to be the elevation of self-taught, or naive art from the realm of artifact to that of fine art, and the role of museum, art collectors and dealers in commodifying art and creating value for it, arguing that the personal legitimacy of the self-taught artist is the market-driven means to valorize aesthetic authenticity. Fine contends that the larger art community justifies the valorization of naive art by emphasizing the inherent genius of the artist. He argues that three aspects of the self-taught artist create the ideological model for genius. First is the perception of the self-taught producer as an “autochthonous artist,” as one “who allegedly stands outside the community” and who represents individual and intuitive expression. Western society admires artists, Fine explains, who can “impulsively create a meaningful world without relying upon others. What better justification for creativity than that it doesn’t depend on and that it wasn’t produced for the benefit of others.” Second, there is a perception that self-taught artists are compelled to create based on the fundamental human need

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for expression, and thus their work is a powerful representation of honesty and sincerity.\textsuperscript{23} Lastly – and central to the image and authority of the self-taught artist – is the association of the artist with purity.\textsuperscript{24} Such an artist must appear to possess child-like virtue, naïveté and innocence for outside attention to them to be seen as justified and their work to be regarded as valid.\textsuperscript{25}

Despite increasing interest in Folk art by scholars such as Ardery and Fine, Maud Lewis, even as Canada’s “foremost primitive painter,” has received little scholarly attention.\textsuperscript{26} Including the three documentary films discussed in this thesis, Lewis’s life and work have been covered primarily by popular media. The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) has the largest permanent collection of Lewis paintings, and in 1984 the Lewis house was purchased by the Government of Nova Scotia and turned over to the Gallery for restoration and conservation, where it remains on permanent display.\textsuperscript{27} In relation to its collection and the Lewis house, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia has published two books about Lewis; the first is a short biographical monologue, The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis, by Canadian author and playwright Lance Woolaver, and the second, The Painted House of Maud Lewis: Conserving a Folk Art Treasure, by art conservator Laurie Hamilton, details the installation of the house in the gallery. The Lewis collection at the AGNS is also the subject of a Masters of Arts thesis by Laurie Dalton, entitled, “The Scotiabank Maud Lewis Gallery and the ‘Folking Over’ of Nova Scotia,” which examines how the idea of the Folk is circulated and reproduced within the Maud Lewis exhibition at the Art Gallery of

\textsuperscript{23} Fine, 2003, 160-161.
\textsuperscript{25} Fine, 2003, 161-162.

"The Traffic in Culture"

In recent years, anthropologists and art historians such as James Clifford, Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, and George Marcus and Fred Myers have critically examined the ways in which meaning and value are created by cultural agents, challenging long-held assumptions about the nature of art, authenticity and authority. These scholars have also turned their attention to the circulation of art objects within Western systems of classification – what Marcus and Myers term “the traffic in culture.” Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* deals with the process by which non-Western objects are “contextualized and given value” in the West. Subjected to what he calls “arbitrary systems of value and meaning,” Clifford argues that these objects find authenticity by being appropriated into Western collections and institutions. To facilitate his analysis of this process, Clifford poses the following questions:

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33 Clifford, 1988, 217, 217-220.
What criteria validate an authentic cultural or artistic product?
What are the differential values placed on old and new creations?
What moral and political criteria justify ‘good,’ responsible, systematic collecting practices?...How are ‘antiquities,’ ‘curiosities,’ ‘art,’ ‘souvenirs,’ ‘monuments,’ and ‘ethnographic artifacts’ distinguished?...Why have many anthropological museums in recent years begun to display certain of their objects as ‘masterpieces’?34

In response to these queries, Clifford notes that an art object may “move” from one context to another, gaining or losing cultural and artistic value depending on the direction of its circulation. To this end Clifford has constructed a diagram to map what he describes as the “art-culture system” (fig. 1) – two axes and four art-cultural zones along which objects may travel: the zone of the authentic masterpiece (zone 1); the zone of the authentic cultural artifact (zone 2); the zone of inauthentic art and fakes (zone 3); and the zone of inauthentic objects including tourist art (zone 4).35 Within this system objects are classified and assigned relative value and, as Clifford explains, movement in either direction is common.36 Given art world recognition of an object’s “worth,” “rarity” or discovered “beauty,” for example, an object circulating within the zone of cultural artifact (zone 2) may increase its value and transition to the domain of fine art (zone 1). Similarly, an object within the realm of artifact or fine art, if perceived to be somehow “inauthentic,” can be seen to decrease in value and enter the realm of “inauthentic objects” – of the four zones, the realm of objects that are least valued. Clifford concludes by noting that the

34 Clifford, 1988, 221.
36 Clifford, 1988, 223.
Western system of classification is institutionalized but not immutable – “[t]he categories of the beautiful, the cultural, and the authentic have changed and are changing,” he writes.37

Phillips and Steiner work to respond to the questions put forward by Clifford, challenging the dichotomous categories of “artifact” and “work of art,” the movement of tourist art within

37 Clifford, 1988, 229.
these categories, and the nature of authenticity. They interrogate the art/artifact distinction by adding to the system what they describe as a third “pivotal” category – the commodity. In doing so, they build on recent studies by anthropologists and art historians that challenge the traditional hierarchical structure of the art-artifact-commodity system, arguing that “works of art, aesthetic valuations, and judgments of taste are indeed highly dependent on an object’s commodity potential and economic value.” In turn, they postulate that the “delicate membrane thought to encase and protect the category ‘art’ from contamination with the vulgar ‘commodity’ has been eroded and dissolved from both sides.” Thus, Phillips and Steiner conclude that the art-artifact-commodity system must no longer be treated in terms of distinct and separate categories, but rather be “merged into a single domain where the categories are seen to inform one another rather than to compete in their claims for social primacy and cultural value.”

Marcus and Myers also critically reexamine the categories in which art objects circulate, challenging the certainties of “distinctive, bounded communities [in the art world] – the boundary between observers and observed – that academic practices have tended to produce.” Art and anthropology have recently been disrupted, they note, through the “undermining of the categories that made difference systematic, interpretable and ultimately meaningful as a mode of cultural critique.” Nevertheless, there remains a “powerful irony” in the traffic between art and anthropology, that despite the delegitimization of the concept of the “primitive,” the art world

38 Phillips and Steiner, 3-4.
39 Phillips and Steiner, 6.
40 Phillips and Steiner, 15.
41 Phillips and Steiner, 15-16.
42 Phillips and Steiner, 16.
43 Marcus and Myers, 3.
44 Marcus and Myers, 19.
persists in the construction of the Other.45 “The strong bond between anthropology and art still resides in this mode of constructing cultural value by evoking or positing cultural difference.” Marcus and Myers note, even though recent studies of boundary construction and “the traffic in culture” argue that “…the art world ought no longer to count on its conventional notions, guaranteed by anthropology, of cross-cultural alterity.”46

Conclusion

My purpose in this thesis is to engage with the ideological questions raised by Clifford, Phillips and Steiner, and Marcus and Myers in connection with the movement of art objects and the mutability of artistic categories. I also aim to provide a concrete example in Maud Lewis of what Marcus and Myers term the “powerful irony” in the “traffic in culture” between art and anthropology, illustrating the process by which cultural value is created by evoking difference. Through the three documentaries about Lewis and her work, I also intend to both confirm and extend Clifford’s theory on the circulation of objects with the Western art-culture system, showing that objects not only transition between categories, but may also hover simultaneously in more than one.

46 Marcus and Myers, 20.
Chapter 3

Maud Lewis as the “Artist-Genius”

Originality, prodigy, virtuosity and spirituality – these are the traits of the archetypal artist-genius, one whose work is singular, transcendent and masterful. This chapter explores the reproduction of Maud Lewis as an artist-genius in the documentaries, *The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis*, *Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows* and *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*. I begin with discussion of the concept and characteristics of genius, and show how the films endeavour to identify with Lewis each of its key traits, consistently referring to her work as indicative of her intuitiveness, giftedness and spirituality. The second section of this chapter focuses specifically on the supposed transcendent nature of Lewis’s genius. For this I analyze the films’ portrayal of Lewis’s husband, Everett Lewis, and argue that he serves as a marker for the materiality of the Folk that Lewis must overcome in order to produce her art. I conclude the chapter with discussion of a scene from *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* that deals with a reception held in connection with the opening of an exhibition of Lewis’s work at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1996. It demonstrates how the concept of Lewis as the artist-genius plays out in a museum setting. In an examination of it, I show how the notion of the artist-genius is a paradoxical one, arguing that a solo exhibition within an anthropological museum conflates the realms of fine art and Folk art, casting Lewis in an ambiguous position both of and above the Folk.

The Artist-Genius

German philosopher Immanuel Kant writes that genius “is a talent for producing that for which no definite rule can be given...[O]riginality must be its first property.” For Kant, the artist-
genius is driven by intuition, “not know[ing] himself how he has come by his ideas.”

Art theorists Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz elaborate upon Kant’s definition of the genius, proposing that such an individual should display early promise of talent/genius, virtuosity, and both spirituality and wisdom in the works he creates.

As art historian Catherine Soussloff notes, these features of genius formed the framework of the artist biography. The “myth” of the artist is perpetuated by the biographical genre: “Our primary source is how the artist was judged by contemporaries and posterity – the biography of the artist in the true sense of the word,” wrote Kris and Kurz, “At the very core of this stands the legend about the artist.” Furthermore, Soussloff continues, “when the mythological artist appears in biography, we think that we are provided with an exemplar, and a ‘proof,’ of the ‘reality’ – literally, the bodily presence – of the historical and imaginary.” Feminist art historians agree, arguing that the mythologizing process prevents the artist from being understood as a product of social history.

The documentaries I deal with in this thesis portray Lewis as the typical artist-genius, following both the Kantian notion of intuitiveness and originality and Kris and Kurz’s formula of prodigy, virtuosity and spirituality. The films advance this construction through the format of filmic biography, at the centre of which stands Lewis as the mythological artist. For this, the documentaries deploy seemingly expert witnesses in the field, those authorized to speak about the

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48 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979), 52. I use the masculine pronoun in the case to conform with the original text.
50 Kris and Kurz, 2.
51 Soussloff, 142.
qualifications of “genius” – judge and art collector Philip Woolaver, Nova Scotian artist Jonathan Cook, gallery owners Claire Stenning and Bill Ferguson, and art historian Cora Greenaway. Woolaver, interviewed in The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis, asserts that Lewis was “quite incapable of painting anything revolting. And she had simplicity to the finest essence imaginable… gift, gift, massive gift, with the most awful, limited opportunity to express it.”

For Cook, Lewis’s paintings are “valid,… a direct statement of things experienced or imagined and very forthright in their statement and use of colour and her drawing – definitely works of art. Possibly minor works of art,” he adds, “but still, she has something to say and she’s saying it.”

For this interview with the makers of The Once-Upon-a-Time-World of Maud Lewis, Cook is given authority to qualify Lewis’s work by the manner in which he is filmed, shown seated on a stool in his studio with several easels behind him angled towards the camera to show his works-in-progress – a series of nude paintings (fig. 2). The sense here is that Cook is a professional artist, trained in representing the nude human form, and thus he is set in stark contrast to Lewis’s much-referenced lack of formal art education. Similarly, Stenning and Ferguson, pronouncing that Lewis’s work is “naïve and fresh” with a “child-like quality,” are granted authority by being positioned strategically within their gallery.

Stenning, for instance, speaks to the camera from a seated position on the floor of her gallery, while also suavely leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette. The paintings on the wall behind her, like those in Cook’s studio, signify her authority as a collector and her apparent ability to identify “good art” (fig. 3) --that she possesses the authority to assign value to cultural objects. Greenaway, the art historian, is suitably placed in a library, periodically shifting through large, unidentified volumes, showing that she carries the

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53 The Illuminated Life, Woolaver.
54 Once-Upon-A-Time World, Cook.
Figure 2 Jonathan Cook in Studio


Figure 3 Claire Stenning

authority of disciplinary art history (fig. 4).

Figure 4 Cora Greenaway
(Image: The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis, directed by Peter D’Entremont, DVD, National Film Board of Canada, 1998.)

“There were no limits to her world,” she claims of Lewis’s genius.

Her world was full and large and open with wide skies and that’s what she teaches. That it isn’t how you live, it isn’t your real circumstances, but it’s what’s inside you that can make or break you. And it made Maud, life never broke her, no matter what happened. Painting was breathing for her, it was her life’s blood.56

The witnesses and the films’ narrators work especially to cast Lewis as an inherent artist-genius; in other words, Lewis’s talent/genius is portrayed as innately spontaneous and instinctive. Each film meticulously points out that she has been isolated from the world of Fine Art and has developed as an artist without professional intervention or outside influence. “I have never seen
many other paintings from other artists,” Lewis herself states in an interview in *The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maud Lewis.* 57 “She’s not been exposed to art galleries, she doesn’t read the national periodicals or those sorts of things, so she is expressing herself instinctively,” Ferguson affirms. “She doesn’t associate with other artists, at all,” Cook offers, “she apparently feels this need to express herself along certain lines and therefore there’s no point in her contacting artists to find out how do you do this or do that – she knows how to do it.” 58 The narrator in *A World Without Shadows* makes a similar pronouncement: “She never took a painting lesson, she never even saw any works of art! She was kind of cut off from everything, except what was inside her.” 59 Lewis is cast as a purer form of the artist, one who is unfettered by formal conventions and considerations. Her genius lies in her instinctive ability to create and express, in her “untainted” vision and representation of the world.

Lewis’s genius is also often placed within the sphere of spirituality. Witnesses and interviewees frequently use words such as “beauty” and “joy” to describe the artist and her work. References are made to the purity of Lewis’s soul and the reflection of that in her art. “…[O]ut came beauty, out came joy, absolute, unadulterated happiness,” Greenaway effuses, “now that takes some doing, and you have to have a beautiful mind and a beautiful soul, or else you can’t do it. That’s what made her an artist.” 60 Lewis’s genius operates on an almost mystical level, her “beautiful soul” transferring itself into paint and onto canvas in profound artistic expression.

56 *The Illuminated Life,* Greenaway.
57 *Once-Upon-A-Time World,* ML.
58 *Once-Upon-A-Time World,* Cook.
59 *A World Without Shadows,* narrator.
60 *The Illuminated Life,* Greenaway.
Transcending the Folk

The nineteenth-century system of art classification, Michael Podro has noted, was steeped in Kantian notions of freedom and material needs. For Kant, human beings are burdened by physical needs and can ascend beyond the constraints of the material world only through the exercise of Reason. By extension, the “role of art was seen as overcoming our ordinary relations to the world,” Podro concludes. The highest forms of art, therefore, are those that transcend the physicality of Nature and overcome base materiality. These ideas carried forward into the twentieth-century, remaining, as noted by Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, “relatively undisturbed” in mainstream art history.

Kantian undertones come through clearly in the films’ treatment of Maud Lewis. While she is firmly anchored in the tradition of the Folk, which I discuss in the next chapter, she is nonetheless seen to simultaneously overcome the constraints of her material world. This is most evident in the films’ constant reference to her physical disability, often praising her capacity to create despite debilitating arthritis in her hands. It is Everett Lewis, however, who serves most poignantly as Lewis’s Kantian counterpoint. In the films Everett comes to represent the pure physicality of the Folk – the working of the land and performance of chores – as well as the more negative constraints of the material world – poverty, lack of education, and mean-spiritedness. He serves as a marker in the material world, a fixed point that Lewis, in contrast, transcends.

The makers of CBC’s Telescope, the first filmmakers to tackle the subject of Maud Lewis, were presented with a problem: how to filmically represent Lewis’s fundamental Folkishness, such as her proximity to the land, when she herself does not work or cultivate it.

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62 Phillips and Steiner, 6.
Lewis is physically unable to participate in traditional forms of physical labour, as her husband explains,

I don’t expect a whole lot of her because she ain’t strong enough. What she can’t do I do myself. Not like anybody else that you can leave home and they do the work and you could go off somewhere and stay all night amongst your friends and come home the next day but she can’t very well ‘cause she can’t get around like she ought to. Makes a big difference.63

It is Everett Lewis, therefore, who comes to embody the physical and manual labour associated with the life of the Folk. “As Maud Lewis creates,” The Once-Upon-A-Time-World narrator explains, “husband Everett toils away at tasks he learned as a boy – chores he has performed for six decades with a kind of dignity characteristic of him.”64 Under this narration and throughout the rest of the film, and also interspersed throughout A World Without Shadows, footage dealing with Everett shows him engaged in traditional farmer/peasant occupations, closely rooted to the land, with only antiquated farming technology mediating his connection to the soil. As Everett digs for potatoes with a pitchfork and reaches down to shake the dirt from the roots, he recalls,

Well, I hardly went through the first grade, till when I was a little fellow I went out to work. I’d milk about five cows that morning. ‘Cause it had to be, it had to be. All the kids then had their work – had so much to do when they came home, had so much to do in the mornings before they went. Most of all, I had to work because they had no pension in them days.65

And as he directs a team of hitched oxen,

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63 Once-Upon-A-Time World, Everett Lewis.
64 Once-Upon-A-Time World, narrator.
65 Once-Upon-A-Time World, Everett Lewis.
When I was small, we used to have teams, oxen teams. The other neighbour had no team and they’d go haul all her wood. And all she’d have to do was make a supper and give them their supper and they have all the wood cut up, all ready to put in the stove, that’s what they used to do.\textsuperscript{66}

Most of the interviews with Everett follow the tenor of the ones above – Everett’s voice-over recalling “them days gone by,” while actual footage shows his daily labour routine. The emphasis here is on Everett’s hearty adherence to a type of rustic self-sufficiency. The scene of him growing and gathering his own potatoes, for instance, makes a full self-sufficient loop later in the film when Everett is cooking on the woodstove and describes his “best meal – bread potatoes, fish and meat, whatever I have.”\textsuperscript{67} The film’s lengthy dedication to Everett establishes Lewis as Folk by proxy or, in other words, Folk through marital association. Although Lewis’s disability and severe arthritis prevent her from fully assuming the physical role of the Folk, she may nevertheless remain a seemingly true member of the Folk through Everett’s efforts. His adherence to traditional tools and farming techniques, his closeness with the land, and his quaint self-sufficiency become hers by extension. The filmmakers want the audience to see Maud and Everett Lewis as one homogenous and integrated unit, together forming an exemplar of the living Folk.

While Maud and Everett Lewis’s relationship is based on inter-dependence and reciprocity, Once-Upon-A-Time-World establishes that they nonetheless fulfill traditional gender roles. The strength of the relationship lies with Everett; he is a loving yet decidedly dominant husband, relying on his wife for emotional support and overall contentment, while the wife

\textsuperscript{66} Once-Upon-A-Time World, Everett Lewis.
\textsuperscript{67} Once-Upon-A-Time World, Everett Lewis.
subserviently depends on him for food, shelter and material provisions. In a lengthy monologue, Everett explains his views on gender roles:

That’s why I say a man should be boss of his wife, although she’s probably boss in the house. Sometimes she does things that I don’t like, and I tell her not to but she does – she shouldn’t do that in a way because she’s going against her husband when she does that. That’s one thing. And the husband won’t like that. If you tell them not to do a thing and they do it, well, then your husband thinks a lot about that but he don’t say much. If you like anybody why won’t you do what they say. Now take that dog, that dog will do whatever I tell her or him either, or either one of them… if I tell her to come back she’ll come back. Course she’s feeling good now haven’t had her out in a little while, I’m going to take her out pretty soon, let her have a run. But they kiss me every morning. You come over now and see what they’ll do... See what they do? That shows you who they like. 68

Everett begins the interview speaking more-or-less to the camera, his head and shoulders filling the frame. He is outside the house, near a garden and shed; Lewis is absent, presumably indoors. The camera, while usually trained on Everett’s face, occasionally shifts abruptly to show a passing car or to a close-up shot of one of Everett’s dogs. When Everett begins to speak about his pets, the camera pans out as Everett beckons the unseen camera crew to follow him into the dog pen. There the camera waits on Everett as he interacts with his dogs; he speaks to them, wagging his finger, gives one a kick, and then lets them lick the side of his face. Laughing, he then closes the gate while the camera flits between him and shots of the dogs. The entire interview segment with Everett, of which this gender role/dog discussion occupies the largest portion, lasts for over five minutes – a significant amount of time for a short, thirty-minute television program. This
scene seems a little more than odd, the relatively extended length of the entire sequence, the randomness of the dog close-ups, and the long, unedited shots of Everett give the feeling that something is off-kilter and slightly disturbing. Its strangeness makes it difficult to discern the intention of the filmmakers: what do they hope to achieve in this? After all their efforts to elevate Everett’s character, are they ridiculing him and his brutish comparison of his wife and dogs? Or, instead, are they lauding his firm attitude on marital roles? Although the scene may work to establish a number of things, certainly key among them are two aspects of Maud and Everett’s relationship. First, Maud and Everett Lewis are somewhat antiquated, out-of-touch with the attitudes of the real world, and hence are evidently preserved members of the Folk. Second, they both uphold traditional gender roles, also a key characteristic the Folk; just as Everett may kick the dogs one moment and kiss them the next, he may discipline his wife and still maintain a loving and caring relationship, a marital tradition the film wistfully idealizes.

For the most part, however, *Once-Upon-A-Time-World* adopts a tone of admiration for Everett. The film lauds both his ability to fundamentally provide for himself and Maud and his dedication to a rustic lifestyle. His elemental connection with the land, described at length through interviews and footage like those above, is revered as an indicator of industriousness and perseverance. The audience is to see Everett, like the Folk as a whole, as an emblem of quiet dignity; the narrator, in fact, makes an explicit reference to Everett’s “dignity” in relation to his diligent work ethic.69 The film encourages the viewer to feel a sense of compassion for Everett, especially so in the scene where Everett recalls his school days:

When I went to school they used to make fun of me. Course they were in the ninth and eighth grade and I was only on my ‘abe’. And so they kept teasing me, about being in my abe book. I told

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the woman I was working for that I woundn’t go, she said why, I said they kind of tease me about being in the abc book. Well she said don’t mind them, you keep going and after a while that might stop. So anyway I kept on going, so I was there about three or four weeks, and the teacher said I’m going to give you something to write on the slate, and whoever does the best gets a prize… [T]hey didn’t say anything more about me being in the abc book after that, that fixed it. …Everett she said, it’s too bad you can’t come to school because you’re the best writer I’ve got in the school.  

Here the viewer is to feel sympathy for Everett’s arduous life, and is invited to admire him for having overcome childhood obstacles, this also being a sign of his steadfast work ethic and commendable dedication.

In addition to the positive character traits discussed above, Everett is portrayed as a veritable hero – the saviour of Lewis from a dismal and unproductive life. As the narrator describes,

[Maud] was very happy, and then her parents died, and she went to live with an aunt in Digby. She still painted a little but she worked very hard around the house, and after she grew up she became badly crippled with arthritis and she was very lonely. Now, not far away there was an illiterate farm hand named Everett Lewis and he was lonely too. And just like in a storybook when Maud and Everett met, they suddenly weren’t lonely anymore. Within a week they were married. That was nigh on thirty years ago. Well, with Everett urging her on, Maud Lewis began to paint in earnest.  

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70 Once-Upon-A-Time World, Everett Lewis.
From this description, Everett is the linchpin in Lewis’s life, representing the turning point in both her happiness and artistic production. Without Everett, the narrative articulates, Lewis was alone, unhappy, and not yet a fully realized artist. Everett’s key role in Lewis’s artistry is not understated, reiterated later in the film in an interview with Edith M. Wallace of the Digby Courier, who notes that many passing tourists “mention how fortunate [Maud] was in having a husband like Everett who encouraged her to keep on with her painting.” The corresponding footage shows Everett bent over a piece of board, saw in hand, diligently preparing the surfaces for Lewis’s paintings. As such, Everett is established as both the initiator and long-term preservor of Lewis’s emotional and, more importantly, artistic well-being.

The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis takes a different approach. While the film is generally concerned with portraying Maud Lewis in a positive light, the male figures in the film are dealt with differently. There are two of them – Lewis’s brother, Charles Dowly, and her husband, Everett. And they are represented as the two negative extremes of masculinity – Charles as the spendthrift scoundrel and Everett as the stingy miser.

While Charles and his sister had been close during their childhood, the film explains, they drifted apart as they aged. The responsibility for the estrangement is placed squarely on Charles, caused, the film construes, by his flirtation with modernity and his flippant disregard for frugality. In the scene describing Lewis and Charles’s parting of ways, a photograph of a grinning Charles in stylish clothing appears on screen, accompanied by an upbeat jazz melody. The narrator states, “Charles was the leader of a popular orchestra…and manager of the movie theatre. As Charles became well-known, he spent less time with Maud and viewed his sister as an embarrassment.”

That is to say, as Charles assumed a place within the modern, urban world, he became estranged

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71 Once-Upon-A-Time World, narrator.
72 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
from the Folk. The film fails to point out that a full-time career would inevitably have caused Charles to spend less time with his childhood family, nor does it contextualize his “embarrassment” or cite the source for this surprisingly harsh pronouncement. Later in the film, one of the Yarmouth cousins says that “[Maud’s] brother took everything, and I guess she didn’t get much.”73 “Her brother had abandoned her, her world had fallen apart,” the narrator continues, “…what little inheritance there was had been squandered by Charles. Maud and Charles would never speak again.”74

The film’s depiction of Everett is slightly more nuanced than the flat characterization of Charles, but it is hardly less negative. The interview with Philip Woolaver provides some background drawn from Everett’s early life: “He was considered sort of half-witted because he grew up in the poor house. And the poor house was a bad, bad place… nothing in Dickens was any worse.”75 While the “half-witted” comment is obviously unfavourable, the information about the poor house is key in this treatment to understanding Everett’s attitude regarding money and finances, a contextual fact that, after this point, the film seems to entirely forget. For the rest of its duration, it portrays Everett as unwilling to spend money and focuses on how his stinginess negatively affected the quality of Lewis’s life. Cora Greenaway states in an interview, “I would say that her daily life was poor; it was poor in everything, poor in the way she lived, and poor in mind. Everett was a…he was stingy, unbelievably stingy,”76 suggesting that Everett’s frugality was the root cause of Lewis’s poorness of life and poorness “in mind.” Everett’s lack of education is also stressed in the film; the narrator points out that he was illiterate, and from Greenaway’s comment, the poorness in life is somehow connected with poorness in mind, as if to suggest that stupidity and stinginess were, in his case, inextricably linked. Furthermore,

73 *The Illuminated Life*, Maud Lewis’s cousin.
74 *The Illuminated Life*, narrator.
75 *The Illuminated Life*, Woolaver.
Greenaway insinuates that the misery in Lewis’s life was largely caused by Everett’s faults and their material poorness. “Maud,” she states frankly, “…lived a miserable life, we might as well say, in that little house, and with Everett, who was, well, not Prince Charming.”

The dramatic reconstructions in the film portray an even darker side to Everett than put forth in the interviews. In a scene of the dramatized Everett traveling door-to-door selling Lewis’s early paintings, the narrator states, “Everett was illiterate, but he was the first to recognize an opportunity in Maud’s paintings. He couldn’t read, but he could add.” The combination of the narrator’s emphasis on the dichotomy between reading and adding, the suggestion that Everett’s actions were solely motivated by financial gain, and the condescending tone, renders this a scene highly demeaning to Everett. While he is portrayed here as opportunistic and money-grabbing, Lewis, when she begins to sell paintings herself, is contrastingly construed as positively hard-working and noble. The tone in the scene when she hangs her “Paintings for Sale” sign is light-hearted and uplifting, and while Everett was merely calculating profit, she was fighting for a “chance for acceptance.” Furthermore, Everett is portrayed as not only stingy or money-grabbing, but downright furtive and thieving. Although no interview suggests that Everett stole from Lewis, the dramatic reconstructions show him hiding her money in a jar, glancing suspiciously in either direction. In a later dramatic scene, he removes her earnings from a letter, lets the rest of the contents drop to ground, and bikes off with the money in his pocket – “He couldn’t resist the temptation,” the narrator explains. Lewis is shown picking up the discarded letter, and then dropping the laundry in dismay and sadness as she realizes the money is gone.

76 The Illuminated Life, Greenaway.
77 The Illuminated Life, Greenaway.
78 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
79 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
80 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
Although Everett is predominantly cast in a negative light, the film nevertheless makes a few positive remarks about him, casting him sometimes as the reluctant saviour of Lewis. “It’s not too strong to say that Everett was [Maud’s] savior in the sense of legitimating her,” comments Philip Woolaver about Maud and Everett’s early marriage. Indeed, the film carries on to point out several beneficial aspects of their marital relationship. Everett suspended traditional household roles so as to allow Lewis to “be free to paint [while] Everett would do what he considered the woman’s work.” At one point, the film shows the dramatized Maud and Everett Lewis walking together down a country lane, as the narrator asserts that “Everett became a reliable partner.” These comments, however, seem in strange contradiction to the film’s overall negative construction of Everett. Moments before calling him a “reliable partner,” the film construed him as a miserly sneak thief, stealing from his hard-working wife. And when not outright contradictory, the positive comments about Everett are laden with condescension and grudgingness. Of Lewis’s later life, the narrator explains, “Maud was now unable to walk and barely able to paint. Everett displayed an uncharacteristic generosity. She appreciated his kindnesses, no matter how strange a form they might take.” As the narrator describes Everett’s “uncharacteristic generosity” a dramatic reconstruction shows Everett pushing Lewis about the forest in a small wheelbarrow. This act of kindness is lessened by insertion of the term “uncharacteristic,” and the description of their wheelbarrow trip as “strange” reeks of disdain on the part of the filmmakers. As such, the positive comments about Everett are so contradictory, delivered with reluctance, or marred with such condescension that they do little to temper the film’s overall negative construction of him.

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81 The Illuminated Life, Woolaver.
82 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
83 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
84 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
The Illuminated Life features one other instance of negative male influence. The film recounts the circumstances of the birth of and subsequent contact with Lewis’s illegitimate daughter. “When Maud was twenty-five,” the narrator remarks abstractly, “she attracted a gentleman caller,” resulting in Lewis’s “deep, dark secret.” Following this, an account of the child’s immediate removal after birth and Lewis’s misinformed belief that the baby was a stillborn boy is given in interviews with Lewis’s cousins. At one point in their narrative, a dramatized Lewis is seen walking alone, in the dark, with a baby in her arms, visually constructing her as the lonely victim. The film also makes the tenuous suggestion that Lewis intuitively knew the truth about her child. After the account of the daughter’s contact with Lewis in later years, the narrator concludes, “Maud may have suspected that Kaye was, in fact, her daughter, but might have been too afraid of Everett’s reaction.” This episode is designed to elicit an instinctive response of pity for Lewis’s plight, and to construct her as the victim of the “gentleman caller,” her father’s lies, Everett’s domination, and society’s cruelties.

These negative constructions of men in the figures of her brother, Charles, and her husband, Everett, serve to contrast and thereby highlight Lewis’s admirable characteristics, as well as her victimized status and need for protection. Her intelligence, kindness, generosity, domesticity, and spirituality are heightened when placed beside the callousness and irresponsibility of Charles and the miserly, sneaky and thieving qualities of Everett. They operate to strengthen the seemingly transcendent quality of Lewis work – the perception that Lewis produced a series of bright, dynamic paintings in spite of the reality of her life, and that she overcame the impediments to her creative spirit generated by the inherent badness of Charles and Everett. Everett in particular represents a fixed point in the material world, an unchanging pillar

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85 The Illuminated Life, Maud Lewis’s cousin.
86 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
of everything mean and physically crude that Lewis must overcome in order to express her genius.

**Into the Museum**

In recent years, scholars have examined the ways in which cultural agents, specifically museums, create meaning and value in cultural objects.\(^{87}\) “The museum’s primary function is ideological, note Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “[i]t is meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society’s most revered beliefs or values.”\(^{88}\) In general, they are seen as temples of authority, keepers of society’s meta-narratives, thereby “affirm[ing] the power and social authority of a patron class.”\(^{89}\) According to George Marcus and Fred Myers, objects within the museological system “only accumulate cultural value to the extent that they are inscribed in ‘histories.’”\(^{90}\) They explain that cultural value is constructed through “positing or evoking difference”:

The key disruption for anthropology and modern art was an undermining of the categories that made difference systematic, interpretable, and ultimately meaningful as a mode of cultural critique, a function that empowered much of twentieth-century anthropology (the ‘primitive’ as a utopian or merely bizarre

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\(^{88}\) Duncan and Wallach, 449.

\(^{89}\) Duncan and Wallach, 449, 449-452.

\(^{90}\) Marcus and Myers, 27.
alternative to Western routine and common sense) as well as much of twentieth-century avant-garde art.\textsuperscript{91} Phillips notes that the very structure of macro-level classifications within the museum system also works to create “domains of inclusion and exclusion” by dividing along the broad categories of Art, Archaeology, Ethnology, History, Folk Culture, Natural Science and Science.\textsuperscript{92} Phillips notes the hierarchies at work, for instance, in the division between “History” and “Ethnology”; when objects are assigned to the category of “History,” their makers become part of a dynamic and progressive process, while the assignment of other objects to “Ethnology” or “Folk Culture” “invests them with notions of the traditional, the timeless, and the technologically retrograde.”\textsuperscript{93}

This section my thesis explores the role of the museum of anthropology in the construction of the Folk artist-genius, in particular, its capacity to mythologize the individual artist and yet simultaneously make the art object stand for abstract cultural wholes – as a “typical” example of a product characteristic of a culture. For this I turn to an early scene in \textit{The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis} showing the opening of an exhibition of Lewis’s work – also entitled “The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis” – at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in June 1997. As the camera follows a crowd of people proceeding into the museum, a representative of the institution addresses the audience from a podium (fig. 5):

\begin{quote}
It’s a great pleasure to be here this evening, in Canada’s premier museum, to celebrate with you “The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis.” The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia is pleased that the Canadian Museum of Civilization is hosting this exhibition. I know that people will enjoy this special aspect of our culture. Maud’s inner strength, her courage, her determination and humour and optimism illuminated this world so that she
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{91} Marcus and Myers, 20, 19.
transformed something seemingly mundane into brightness and vitality and joy. This exhibition is virtue rewarded. Done by a wonderful woman who was physically challenged and who lived in primitive surrounds, yet she prevailed and created this great body of work and left a fine legacy – truly an example of the triumph of the human spirit.

Figure 5 Opening at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

(Image: The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis, directed by Peter D’Entremont, DVD, National Film Board of Canada, 1998.)
The speaker denotes the CMC as the country’s “premier museum,” which not only places the organizer of the exhibition, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, in a subsidiary role to that of the national institution, but also identifies the museum as the epicentre of the nation’s culture. The third sentence of the address – “I know that people will enjoy this special aspect of our culture” – is rife with ambiguities. It is unclear to whom the speaker refers – are the ‘people’ the museum-goers in attendance, patrons of the Museum of Civilization, or tourists? Whatever the case, the words, “our culture,” places Lewis within a national context, suggesting that she plays a role in the nation’s perception of self, and that the Folk, despite their regional ties, are players in the national mythology.  

It is also noteworthy that the address focuses almost exclusively on the artist as opposed to the artwork. Lewis’s “great body of work” is mentioned in passing in the last line of the speaker’s introduction, whereas the artist’s virtuous characteristics and poor circumstances are listed at length. Only positive nouns are used to describe Lewis, words such as “courage,” “optimism,” and “virtue”; these, however, stand in stark contrast to the descriptors used for her surroundings, words such as “mundane” and “primitive.” The speaker stresses that Lewis triumphed as an artist in spite of her surroundings – “…yet she prevailed and created this great body of work” (my emphasis). The documentary takes great care to perpetuate this idea, using the CMC speaker to do so. The moment the speaker begins to address Lewis’s “inner strength,” the scene shifts to a photograph of Lewis, standing in front of her painted house, dressed in bright red, holding a winter landscape, and smiling widely. As the speaker moves on to describe her “humour and optimism,” the image gradually narrows to her face. The description of her physical condition and “primitive surrounds” is accompanied by an image of Lewis’s hands as she holds a paintbrush and the narrow confines of the interior of her house (fig. 6). The “triumph

94 See McKay on nationalism and the Folk, 12-16.
of [her] human spirit” is reflected, however, in her smile. In this scene, both the film and the CMC speaker construct a scenario in which Lewis’s inherent goodness overcame her poverty and the apparent primitiveness of her life, thereby giving value to her work as something transcendent and inspirational.

According to the film, however, only the urban middle classes truly recognize the transcendent genius of Lewis’s work. The documentary includes footage of museum-goers, who are seen walking through the show or examining Lewis’s paintings. Throughout this scene, the narrator provides a definition of the genre at hand: “Folk Art is art without instruction,” she
explains, “It is immediate and simple – familiar, yet intriguing.”

But familiar-yet-intriguing for whom? As she says these words, the camera moves alternatively from full-screen images of Lewis’s paintings to shots of the museum attendees. They are well dressed; many are in formal attire, whether suits or dresses. They walk slowly from painting to painting, sometimes stopping and admiring. This is the typical art gallery-going public. At the moment the narrator describes Folk Art as “familiar,” an image of Lewis’s black cats painting fills the screen. At “yet intriguing,” the scene shifts to footage of a male museum attendee, staring intensely in pensive seriousness. This well-timed shift seems to suggest that Lewis’s paintings are intriguing for this crowd, and specifically, that this collective museum-class – patrons, curators and directors included – is best positioned to appreciate the work’s simplicity, immediacy and execution. At one point during the scene, there is a shot of two men and a woman standing in front of a group of Lewis’s paintings (fig. 7). Silhouetted against images of green fields and blue harbours, they nod appreciatively, discussing and considering the paintings, one man with a hand on his chin. It is as if Lewis’s work is to be read through them and seen from their perspective, implying that her paintings have finally reached an audience that is capable of understanding and valuing her work.

As the camera follows the crowd around the Lewis exhibit, catching the attendees as they pause to admire a painting or point out some detail, the scene appears more and more like an art gallery opening than an anthropological exhibit. Nonetheless, “The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis” is, in fact, an art exhibition contained within an museum of anthropology. Lewis’s work alone is featured, her name and the title of the exhibit are emblazoned on the wall and at the entrance, and her paintings are hung in a neat row around the room in what amounts to a display

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95 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
96 Zolberg, 49-69.
of art in an anthropological context. For this exhibit, the CMC moves away from the mode of viewing and typical display arrangement of an anthropological museum, opting instead to import the installation techniques characteristic of an art museum. In doing so, it imports the values associated with fine art and the art museum – genius, singularity, originality, prodigy – into the context of the anthropological museum, where these values are not normally operative. In this exhibit, Lewis’s work functions, in an immediate sense, within the realm of fine art, yet it is wrapped or contained by the anthropological. This scene is the most dramatic example of the conflation of the categories of art and anthropology, collapsing notions of art and artifact, unique
and typical, original and representative, fine art and Folk art. Here, Lewis’s work operates in both categories simultaneously, as “art” within the gallery and “artifact” within the museum, Lewis herself at once an “artist-genius” and “Folk artist.”

But while this scene may resemble an art gallery opening, it is important to note that the exhibition does indeed take place at the Museum of Civilization, an anthropological museum, as opposed to across the river at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC). In fact, the NGC, which maintains the national collection of Canadian art, does not boast a single painting by Lewis, despite her status as “Canada’s best-known Folk artist.” Instead, her work is contained within the institution dedicated to Canadian culture in the anthropological sense. As Duncan, Wallach and Clifford note, the anthropological, as opposed to the art museum, is responsible for the meta-narratives of culture, the objects within them made to stand for abstract wholes. The museum, in short, is an expression of culture. Maud Lewis, while presented as the traditional artist-genius – prodigious, spiritual, transcendent – at the opening of “The Illuminated Life” exhibition, nonetheless remains the Folk artist-genius within the larger context of the CMC. Her work stands as an immediate expression of Folk culture even as it is seen to rise above the materiality of such a world in its expression of the individual spirit. In doing so, it stands at once for both the collective and the singular, the typical and the original. This is a key example of how Lewis’s work successfully navigates the categories of fine art and Folk art, and points concretely to the inherent paradox within the concept of the Folk artist-genius.
Chapter 4

Maud Lewis as the “Folk”

Maud Lewis, as the Folk artist-genius, occupies a curious position: she is above the Folk yet simultaneously of the Folk. While she transcends the material constraints of her world, the physicality of Folk traditions and their cruder traits, she nevertheless remains curiously and unequivocally a member of the Folk, imbued with all the signature characteristics of the typical Folk-ish persona. In this chapter I continue my discussion of The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows and The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis to show how the films embed Lewis within the Folk tradition. I begin with an overview of William R. Bird’s and Ian McKay’s descriptions of the Nova Scotian Folk as a means of discussing what constitutes them. In the second section of the chapter I show how the portrayal of Lewis corresponds to the overriding Folk archetype by charting the films’ representation of her rurality, isolation, virtuosity, humility, industriousness and innocence. In the third section I examine how Lewis’s work is read as (auto)biography, her life and work represented as mutually constitutive. I conclude by arguing that Lewis is represented as an ideal member of the Folk, but thereby also embodies the inherent contradiction in the concept of the Folk artist-genius, dictating that she simultaneously occupies a space both within and without Folk culture.

Nova Scotian Folk

In the Western imagination, the Folk have manifested as practitioners of the Simple Life; they are a rural and peasant people, defined by their separation from modern society. They live closely and commune harmoniously with nature, drawing their simple and modest living from the land or sea. For the Romanticists, the Folk were the embodiment of the noblest of ideals. They
upheld truth, simplicity and tradition, and as such, represented perfect protagonists in nation-building narratives.99

The inhabitants of the province of Nova Scotia have long been held as the essential Canadian Folk.100 Bird wrote several popular travelogues about the region in the 1950s – *This is Nova Scotia, Off-Trail in Nova Scotia* and *These are the Maritimes*. “Generations of Nova Scotians have been aware of a sense of isolation,” noted Bird while on his travels around the province,

And it has had a certain influence in their lives. Daily existence seems to have a different tempo from the rest of Canada, and there is that inexplicable strength of character that comes to those who live largely by themselves. Average Nova Scotians are quite content to feel apart; in fact, they might feel that way if there were no geographical arrangement keeping them from the mainland, for they hold a tremendous pride in the history of the province, and in it sea environment.101

For Bird, Nova Scotia is a series of “quiet” and “serene” communities, moving at a pace the rest of the world has long left behind (Bird at one point literally describes the ten-miles-per-hour reading on his speedometer as he drives through Paradise, N.S.).102 These communities are populated with warm-hearted, contented, slow-turned Folk. Bird, in a rendezvous with a local “old lady” who had a voice with “plenty of heart and vinegar” and was “dainty as lace and apple-cheeked,” listened as she “rattled on and on” about her memories of farming, berry-picking and

99 McKay, 9, 12-17.
100 The Quebec habitant is also viewed through the lens provided by the Folk concept; see Lynda Jessup, “Marius Barbeau and Early Ethnographic Cinema,” in Lynda Jessup, Andrew Nurse and Gordon Smith, *Around and About Marius Barbeau: Modelling Twentieth-Century Culture* (Gatineau, Que: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2007): 269-304.
101 Bird, 1.
102 Bird 68, 69.
preserving. In Bird’s account, the Nova Scotian Folk are a people of simple wants, who, like the old lady, live traditionally, close to the land and are open and generous with their lives and reminiscences.

McKay notes that by the 1950s, due in part to Bird’s voluminous writings on the region, descriptions of the Nova Scotian Folk landscape were becoming repetitious. “There was a developed rhetoric of the Folk that writers could call upon as the occasion demanded,” McKay states, “Warm hearted descriptions of quaint hamlet X could be easily used for portraits of charming harbour Y.”104 While much of this rhetoric depended on earlier manifestations of the Folk, the Nova Scotians were becoming increasingly identifiable as their own Folk-ish brand, occupying a special place in the Canadian cultural consciousness:

[The Nova Scotian Folk] lived, generally, in fishing and farming communities, supposedly far removed from capitalist social relations and the stresses of modernity… they were rooted to the soil and to the rockbound coast, and lived lives of self-sufficiency close to nature. The Folk and their lore were special and rare…the Folk were apparently peasants, telling old tales, singing old songs, making old crafts in traditional ways, living lives of quiet stolidity in centuries-old villages. They were most often ‘fisherfolk.’… They underlined the Otherness of the Folk: they were simple, isolated, different: they were Other, and not ‘us.’ And yet, paradoxically, the Folk were more ‘us’ than we ourselves, more essentially Nova Scotian (or Canadian), the last true products of our soil and the last authentic producers of our culture.105

103 Bird, 68-69.
104 McKay, 233.
105 McKay, 26-29.
Maud Lewis and the Folk: Isolation, Virtuosity, and Innocence

A central tenet long-held in the Folk mythology is the notion of isolation. The boundaries between modernity and rusticity are always sharply demarcated. Bird begins his travelogue with discussion of Nova Scotia’s isolation, indicating that the idea of separation, of “being apart” from the rest of Canada and the modern world, forms a strong part of the province’s Folk identity. McKay argues that the “true essence” of the Nova Scotian Folk lies in the idea of their isolation; their essential Folkishness is preserved so long as they remain untouched and effectively “unspoiled” by the negativity of modern forces and the drain of urbanity.106

The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, A World Without Shadows and The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis subscribe to this representational paradigm, and so Lewis’s imagined isolation from modernity/urbanity forms a major theme for all three films. The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis, for instance, begins to establish the idea of isolation within the opening moments of the film. The viewer first sees a dark scene of the ocean, distinguished only by the ambient noise of the water and the sound of a crow. Some somber piano music can be heard, joined shortly by a single violin. The camera moves from the water to a rocky shore, where the lone figure of Lewis, in dramatic reconstruction, is seen walking slowly along the road. She arrives at the tiny house of Everett Lewis, whereupon he voices what the audience is thinking – “Who are you? What are you doing out on a night like this?” – to which she responds, “My name’s Maud, Maud Dowly, Mr. Lewis.” She enters, Everett leans out, glancing in either direction, and then shuts the door. The entire scene exudes a sense of dark forlornness. There is no indication of time or place; the viewer is alone on the water just as Lewis is alone on the craggy shore and Everett’s house is alone on the road, each existing in isolation. This is someplace rural, remote, isolated from the modern world.
A World Without Shadows takes a similar non-textual approach to establish Lewis’s isolation. The majority of this film is composed of sequences of rural landscape stills, shots of an abandoned barn follow those of a distant farmhouse, followed by images of snow-covered fields. Over the duration of the film, however, the specific locations of these landscapes are not identified. The barns, fields, farms, and churches remain undesignated and blandly ubiquitous. The only geographic information provided by the narrator relates to Lewis’s birthplace, which, she indicates vaguely, was somewhere “over in Yarmouth County.” The viewer is then left to assume that the images on screen must correspond to this Yarmouth County – a decidedly rural endroit. The film implies that Lewis lives somewhere among these images, surrounded not by any identifiable geographic points, but rather by generic ruralness and the odd farm habitation, visually reinforcing her isolation from anything remotely modern or urban.

Aside from the film’s rapid rotation of rural images, A World Without Shadows also places special emphasis on Lewis’s house. The film includes numerous still shots of the dwelling, both from a distance and at close range, footage of Everett walking to and from the entrance, and archival photographs showing Lewis both inside and out (fig. 8). The narrator describes the Lewis house to the inch, “measur[ing] nine foot by ten foot six.” The specificity of the description of the house, especially given the general vagueness of the narration, immediately draws the viewer’s attention to its rusticity and quant proportions. Following this description, the camera then pulls away from the house, showing it from a distance. Here it looks even more diminutive, with no other habitations in sight and surrounded by trees and fields. In

106 McKay, 30.
107 Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows, directed by Diane Beaudry (National Film Board of Canada, 1976), narrator.
108 A World Without Shadows, narrator.
this sequence, the Lewis home is meant to be seen as something distinctly rural, alone in the country landscape, its inhabitants isolated within the small boundaries of the four walls. The films’ narrators and interviewees often directly address Lewis’s lack of worldly travel experience and meticulously document the ruralness of her lifestyle. In The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, Lewis herself notes, “Halifax, that’s the farthest I’ve been, and that’s a long time ago, before I even got married,” and that she was “born in 1903, 1903, in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.”109 Lewis’s ruralness is affirmed later in the film by gallery owner Bill Ferguson, who comments that she has been “isolated in that particular part of Digby County for practically all of her life.”110 The very title of this documentary – a ‘once-upon-a-time world’ – is both temporally and geographically vague, implying that Lewis inhabits a remote fairytale-esque world. A World Without Shadows is only a little more specific: “Maud’s world was never any

109 The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1965).
bigger than sixty miles in either direction, but she got so much out of it,” the narrator says at one point.111 The Illuminated Life also depicts Lewis’s Nova Scotian birthplace and subsequent hometowns as “remote,” their distance from urbanity compounded by Lewis’s lack of social contact: “It was [in Yarmouth, N.S. that] she left school and became a recluse,” the narrator explains. In this city, “she spent the next two decades in near isolation. She painted at a corner window which she seldom left.”112

Representations of the Folk are often marked by a tone of wistfulness – a sense that one is glimpsing a better place and witnessing virtues that are lacking in the modern world. The Folk are a people to be universally admired (a perception that makes representations of Everett as less than admirable all the more noteworthy). They remain apart from everything negative associated with the modern world – vice, greed, disengagement, corruption and shallowness – and their rural isolation protects them from decay of urbanity. In the absence of any negative outside influences, the Folk’s “true essence,”113 to use McKay’s phrase, is allowed to surface, and they are free to exhibit the finest human qualities. They are content, modest, generous, and industrious. And should the Folk happen to come into contact with any aspect of the modern world – the acquisition of wealth, for instance – they are not tempted to indulge but remain, as one interviewee puts it, “true to themselves.”114

In The Illuminated Life, Lewis represents nothing short of a “triumph of the human spirit.”115 The speaker at her show’s opening at the Canadian Museum of Civilization is exuberant in his praise of her, citing her “strength, her courage, her determination and humour and optimism” in transforming “something seemingly mundane into brightness and vitality and

111 A World Without Shadows, narrator.
112 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
113 McKay, 30.
joy.” The positive descriptors used in reference to Lewis during the CMC speech are echoed by the narrator and the interviewees throughout the rest of the film. She is consistently characterized as having the qualities of an exemplary person. “She was a beautiful child, a lovely child, with a serene look and a high level of intelligence staring out from the depths of her eyes,” maintains Judge Philip Woolaver, a “friend and patron” of Lewis’s. She was a “giver,” states Cora Greenaway, art historian and patron, one who “loved company of any kind.” These assessments culminate in a comment made at the conclusion of the film – that Lewis possessed both a “beautiful mind and a beautiful soul” – ascribing to her an almost transcendent quality.

*A World Without Shadows* is also an unequivocally positive portrait of Lewis. In the film she is presented as a fundamentally good person, devoid of fault or vice. Near the end of the film the narrator speaks of Lewis’s humility in the face of artistic renown:

> When they laid Maud to rest there was quite a mention made of it in the local papers. There were other artists talking about how good she painted and all. But if you could have asked Maud, she wouldn’t have seen the need for all the big discussions. ‘Just getting my work up’ she would say, ‘just getting my work up.’

The film most strongly emphasizes the qualities needed to overcome physical disability. “All her life she was so little and frail, and everything she painted was so strong and full of happiness,” the narrator professes as the screen returns again and again to the smiling photograph of Lewis, imbuing her with such qualities as courage, determination and strength (fig. 9). Even the titles,
A World Without Shadows and The Illuminated Life, for instance, while making reference to her painting style, imbue her life with qualities of beauty, spirituality and happiness.

The Once-Upon-a-Time Life works to establish Lewis’s steadfast industriousness. As Everett Lewis toils in the garden and chops wood, Maud Lewis is seen working indoors, always painting, mixing colours or cleaning her brushes. The first scene in the film is of Lewis seated before a painting, wiping her brush, surrounded by jars of paint and other completed works. The narrator comments,

Well, with Everett urging her on, Maud Lewis began to paint in earnest. The buggies, the oxen, the bird and the lobster boats of that happy childhood – painting in a joyful primitive style, all her own… Tourists discovered her bright bold work, took it home to admiring friends, and now she can’t keep up with the demand. If

121 A World Without Shadows, narrator.
her headaches aren’t bad, if there aren’t too many interruptions, she can paint one little delightful nine by twelve inch picture every day.122

Other than pausing to speak to the camera, and once when she walks to the woodstove, Lewis is always shown at work with her paintbrush. And while it might be expected that a program such as this would include footage of the artist in the process of creating an artwork, the emphasis here is not on Lewis’s art so much as her work ethic. She paints “in earnest,” notes the narrator, diligently producing one piece per day; like Everett Lewis, she is a hard worker, dedicated to her craft.

Furthermore, Lewis seemingly maintains the most admirable attitude about both her work ethic and her art career. As The Once-Upon-a-Time narrator praises her diligence in producing one art piece per day, Lewis modestly replies, “Well, I only do one picture a day and sometime I don’t even do that. And when I have a headache, well, I don’t paint at all.”123 The final scene of the program shows Lewis seated in a corner of her house, brush in hand and paints on the table. The camera alternates between views of her face and close-up shots of the painting-in-progress. Smiling into the camera, Lewis explains that she is “[c]ontented right here in this chair,” and as the camera pulls back to show her at work, she continues: “And now that I’ve got a brush in front of me I’m alright,”124 reassuring the audience that Lewis is happy in the pursuit of her art.

Once-Upon-a-Time Life also emphasizes Lewis’s adherence to a modest and simple lifestyle. “They do love talking to the people passing by, the tourists and so forth. And they get a great deal out of this. So their wants are really quite simple,” Bill Ferguson states at the end of the film, “their meeting with the general public, their animals, their little plot of ground and so

123 Once-Upon-A-Time World, Maud Lewis.
124 Once-Upon-A-Time World, Maud Lewis.
forth. They don’t want much.”125 As Clair Stenning enthusiastically puts it, “what she really wants out of life is a trailer. That’s all!”126 Lewis replies with a little more modest perspective. “Well I’d like to have a little more room – to put my paint and stuff,” she notes, “paint’s in the people’s way, you know. That’s about all I suppose – to have a trailer…they cost too much for a trailer, I couldn’t afford that.”127 The narrator then qualifies this seemingly over-humble dream by stating that it is a “mark of Maud Lewis’s achievement that she even considers the possibility of a trailer. For many obscure years she never even dreamed that sort of dream.”128 By reminding the viewer of the “obscurity” of her previous life and its financial and artistic poverty, Lewis’s enduring modesty is endearing for the viewer, even charming, in that her sense of simplicity and modest desires have seemingly remained unaffected by fame and success.

The Nova Scotian Folk, as noted by McKay, are connected to the land upon which they live, relating deeply to the soil, the shore, and all living things.129 The filmic representations of Lewis, therefore, also pay special attention to this natural theme. “Maud had discovered both a place and purpose for her life,” the narrator of The Illuminated Life testifies at one point in the film, as the dramatized Maud and Everett Lewis are seen driving contentedly through the Digby county countryside, “and their country rambles provided a new inspiration.”130 Her “new inspiration,” the film alludes, is nature, and Lewis is portrayed as having a profound and almost spiritual relationship with her natural surroundings. A montage of leaves, apple blossoms, yellow flowers, tulips and paintings with birds, flowers and butterflies follows the dramatic reconstruction of Maud and Everett’s “country rambles” – a logical pattern of dramatized nature-painting that solidifies the concept of Lewis’s connection with the natural world. A similar scene
shows the dramatized Lewis painting inside her house, whereupon the narrator comments, “…she was content to paint all the winter long, looking forward to the summer season and the visitors who became her friends.” Footage of winter scenes, including shots of horses and a cat, fade to a painting of two birds in the snow, implying that her “visitor friends” are a variety of animals. Later in the film, Lewis “still longed to see that which had been her inspiration,” as the dramatized artist gazes reverently at the fall foliage. These scenes function to connect Lewis on a personal level with the subject of her art, here again suggesting that her work attains a higher level of truth – that it is a “true” portrait of nature from someone deeply connected to nature.

Lewis’s connection with nature runs so deep, in fact, that she is subject to a kind of reverse anthropomorphism, becoming herself imbued with the characteristics of a bird. *The Illuminated Life* is rife with feathered imagery, from the swooping outline of a bird in the introduction, to Wilf Carter warbling “There’s a Bluebird on Your Windowsill” during the closing credits. The atmospheric soundtrack is dominated by twittering bird noises, and it seems that the film takes every opportunity to show images of birds, whether real or painted. “And the birds, you can see the birds flying,” Greenaway says of Lewis’s paintings, “bluebirds, never a crow, no, thank heavens.” Greenaway then articulates the whole purpose of this imagery: “Bluebirds, and yellow birds, and there was Maud, flying away. She flew away, you couldn’t hold her down.”

In *A Life Without Shadows*, Lewis is also seen to have an affinity with birds, an almost ethereal or spiritual connection with these animals. “The seagulls used to come around all the time,” Everett comments in his interview, “right down by her window, and after she went they...”

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130 *The Illuminated Life*, narrator.
131 *The Illuminated Life*, narrator.
132 *The Illuminated Life*, narrator.
133 *The Illuminated Life*, Greenaway.
never come at all, funny, never come at all. They knew she was gone I suppose.”

The film follows this interview segment with a series of seagull paintings, enhanced with gull calls and footage of real seagulls over a small harbour. Again in this film, Lewis’s connection with the birds is so deep-rooted that she herself comes to metaphorically represent the species. In several instances, the film overtly ascribes bird-like qualities to the artist. “Maud used to perch up on the front seat of Everett’s Model T,” describes the narrator, “and while he’d be peddling fish she’d just watch with those bright bird’s eyes, and then she’d paint all through the winter from her memory.”

The lyrics of “Tomorrow’s Flowers” also includes an indirect reference to Lewis as a bird: “Patchworks columns and dandelion hill, brown-eyed cattle and Farmer Bill / Sowing the hillside, guiding the till, images seen from a windowsill.” Here again the image of Maud “perching” is evoked, this time on the windowsill instead of on the seat of the Model T Ford.

Lewis is also portrayed as a child or as imbued with child-like qualities. In The Illuminated Life, Lewis is constructed as having the intellectual capacity and emotional development of a ten-year-old girl. In addition to references to her life and work as “fairytales” by both the narrator and art historian Cora Greenaway, the film adopts a cartoon-esque approach to Lewis. The comment, for instance, about Lewis’s animal visitors “who became her friends” is bizarrely child-like and “Disneyfying” in its implications.

Her work too is repeatedly praised for its youthful innocence, having “this child-like tremendous feeling to it, with no shadows at all – everything is happy and gay, quick and lively.”

“Despite the fact that they have a child-like quality there is still an adult impact in them,” gallery owner Stenning explains to The Once-Upon-A-Time World filmmakers:

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134 A World Without Shadows, Everett Lewis.
135 A World Without Shadows, narrator (my emphasis).
136 The Illuminated Life, narrator: “Eventually the entire interior of their home would become a bright fairytale world of colour.” Greenaway refers to the making of the CBC report: “It was just like a fairytale.”
137 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
I mentioned I believe to you one time about the one that my daughter has, of the two deer sort of hand and hand in the sunset, and this is something that probably wouldn’t occur to a child but to her there is. And of course there’s her wit, and some of them are quite humourous – the eyelashes on the oxen, the sports car with the very large cow looming over it. And there’s always a touch of romance or wit or something. My own favourite? I don’t know, I think probably the one that my daughter has with the small deer because it’s just, it makes me want to cry when I look at it – it’s the loveliest thing.  

The narrator of *A World Without Shadows* describes a point late in Lewis’s life, when busloads of tourists would crowd inside the Lewis home - “that little doll’s house” – implying in doing so that the diminutive proportions of the Lewis’s residence were better suited for a child or a toy than an adult. The “doll’s house” statement obscures any negative associations that could be associated with the size of the Lewis’s home, such as poverty or discomfort. Instead, the house is construed in positive terms; a “doll’s house” conjures up ideas of quaintness, innocence and child-like pleasure, all core attributes of the Folk. Moreover, Lewis herself is seen to “fit” the house, personally identifying with and representing the notion of quaintness. In both instances when the narrator references the house, a photographic image of Lewis appears on screen, showing the artist inside her home, amidst the closely-packed and painted furniture, paintbrushes in hand, smiling widely. The combination of the narrator’s off-screen address and Lewis’s static smiling face makes the argument that she was happy in the house, or that she and the house, in a sense, matched one another in Folkish quaintness. The coinciding statement and photograph also

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140 *A World Without Shadows*, narrator.
lead the viewer to the logical conclusion: if it is a doll’s house, then Maud Lewis is the doll – innocent and cute.

The avian-morphic imagery and the references to childhood advance the idea of Folk-ish innocence. Each image – the bird, the child, the doll – signifies a naïve, pre-adult state of existence, one that is untainted by such harsh realities as those associated with poverty and disability. The images and comparisons serve to enhance a sense of Lewis’s delicacy, that she is a small, fragile individual, in need of shelter and protection from the cruel elements and the encroaching threat of modernity and urbanity. This imagery also reinforces the need for the isolation of the Folk, for the sake of the preservation of fragility and innocence.

Art as (Auto)Biography

*The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows* and *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* are presented as biographies of Lewis. In many of the scenes described in both this and the previous chapter, the biographical information about Lewis is illustrated with one of her paintings. When the narrator speaks of Lewis’s affinity for birds, for instance, a painting of bird appears on the screen, or when referencing her childhood, the camera turns to paintings with children in them. The viewer, in effect, reads Lewis’s biography through her art, and thus her art as autobiographical. Feminist historian Gridelda Pollock has noted that this is a conventional approach to the female artist --that the artist’s work is understood as autobiographical. “In the traditional model,” Pollock explains, “the artwork is a transparent screen through which you have only to look to see the artist as a psychologically coherent subject originating the meanings the work so perfectly reflects.”141 The effect of what Pollock calls “mirror-gazing” is most strikingly apparent in a scene in *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*
when the narrator recounts Lewis’s liaison with a “gentleman caller” and the “deep dark secret” of the birth of her daughter. “Maud may have suspected that Kaye was, in fact, her daughter, but might have been too afraid of Everett’s reaction,” the narrator concludes, a supposition drawn, apparently, from one Lewis painting depicting an infant – a baby in a cradle (fig. 10). In this scene, the painting stands as illustrative of Lewis’s biography and personality; her art and life become mutually constitutive.

Figure 10 Maud Lewis Painting

(Image: The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis, directed by Peter D’Entremont, DVD, National Film Board of Canada, 1998.)

141 Pollock, 1999, 98.
142 The Illuminated Life, narrator.
This constitutive process is also operative in the titles of the films. “Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows” and “The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis” simultaneously reference her life and her work. Both the phrase, “without shadows” and the word, “illumination,” refer to a stylistic quality associated with Folk art. Lewis’s work lacks modeling through tonal gradation, and is characterized instead by strong, saturated, local colours. Linear perspective is handled crudely, the relative scale of objects establishes a sense of recession into distance abruptly. “Without shadows” and “illumination,” however, also reference the nature of the Folk, highlighting such qualities as quaintness, childishness and lack of sophistication. The two may also be read autobiographically, implying that Lewis’s genius has “illuminated” her otherwise harsh existence, enabling her to rise above the material in the expression of a world “without shadows.” In short, the titles of the films themselves are a prime example of the conflation of fine art and Folk art that is made in the figure of Lewis, her work seeming to autobiographically represent both the Folk and her genius.

Conclusion

Through this and the last chapter, I illustrate how the concepts of the artist-genius and the Folk are conflated in the case of Maud Lewis. An interviewee in one of the films may speak of Lewis’s transcendent genius, and in the same breath praise her industrious work ethic. Or a narrator may remark on her artistic spirituality, while firmly placing the artist within rustic and rural boundaries. Lewis is expected to maintain her position in two opposing and non-compatible spheres in her role as the Folk artist-genius, rising above the Folk and yet simultaneously standing for – and positively exemplifying – the very culture she transcends through her genius.
Chapter 5
“Documenting” the Folk Artist-Genius

In the previous two chapters I have discussed the concept of the Folk artist-genius as embodied by Maud Lewis, analyzing the simultaneous casting of the artist as “genius” and “Folk” within the documentaries The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows and The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis. In this chapter I turn to the documentaries themselves, questioning the role of filmic structure and systems of authentication in propagating the concept of the Folk artist-genius. For this I take my cue from film scholar Bill Nichols, who writes that, in order to understand the effect of the documentary film,

[we need… to examine the formal structure of documentary film, the codes and units that are involved, in order to re-see documentary… as a semiotic system that generates meaning by the succession of choices between differences, the continuous selection of pertinent features amongst the various codes and their intersection.\(^{143}\)

This chapter is an effort to “re-see” the documentary treatments of Lewis and to analyze how each generates meaning through the filmic choices and semiotic systems involved in its making.

Before my analysis of the documentaries, however, I begin by providing a brief history of the genre in an effort to place the films at hand in historiographical context as well as to situate my own methodological approach. In the next section, titled “‘Documenting’ Maud Lewis,” I scrutinize what I argue to be each film’s major authorizing device: the positioning of narrator and witnesses in The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis; the idea of memory and truth in
Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows; and the use of dramatic reconstructions in The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis. In the last section, through an exploration of the effect of the camera’s “stalking” of Lewis, I conclude that the filmic medium itself reproduces the inherent paradox in the Folk artist-genius concept, its codes and structures working to authenticate claims on Lewis as the artist-genius, but its lens ultimately distancing Lewis from the viewer and thereby construing her as the Folk Other.

**Documentary Film Theory**

My methodological approach to the analysis of this filmic case study is informed by the theories on documentary film by Alan Rosenthal, Nichols and Brian Winston. These scholars, together with others, have applied the theories of semiology and structuralism to documentary film, arguing that all genres of filmmaking, including the documentary, are symbolic, and therefore documentaries are no “truer” than fictional films. “Documentaries always were forms of re-presentation,” asserts Nichols, “never clear windows onto ‘reality;’ the filmmaker was always a participant-witness and an active fabricator of meaning.” In other words, documentaries are not purveyors of objectivity, nor do they possess any special claim to the truth. “Very few,” however, notes Nichols, “seem prepared to admit through the very tissue and texture of their work that all filmmaking is a form of discourse fabricating its effects,

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146 Nichols, 1988, 49.
147 Rosenthal, 12.
impressions, and point of view.” In addition to this reluctance to accept or foreground the concept of re-presentation, documentary is generally accepted as a separate form, and a “hierarchy of truth in film [has been established] whereby documentary stands higher than fiction.” But while academicians and film theorists may be methodically debunking this pyramid of filmic truth, for the most part audiences continue to accept the fallacious tenet that documentaries are truer than fictional film. Rosenthal suspects that, while the audience is composed of sophisticated viewers who may “grow more aware of the artifice, the means of selection, the biases, and the constraints,” they will nonetheless trust the integrity of the filmmaker and “continue to see documentary as a special genre, a useful tool that provides some clear and necessary observations about the world.”

As the films for this study span four decades and incorporate various styles of documentary, I include a brief summary of the history and four major styles of documentary film, the major source for which is Nichols’s Blurred Boundaries and “The Voice of Documentary,” both of which contain useful synopses and analyses of the historical development of the documentary genre. Griersonian films – named for famous British documentarian John Grierson – were the first to use a “supposedly authoritative yet often presumptuous off-screen narration” – what Nichols calls the “voice-of-God” effect. In an attempt to correct the patronizing and overly didactic aspects of direct address and the apparent absence of objectivity, cinema verite developed in the 1960s in response to the perceived deficiencies of the Griersonian method. This observational style of documentary avoids what were at that point the conventional modes of commentary and, letting history and events seemingly unfold in front of the camera, “leaves the

148 Nichols, 1988, 50.  
149 Winston, 22.  
150 Rosenthal, 18.  
151 Nichols, 1988, 48.
Nichols argues that observational cinema lacks a fundamental historical context, continues to construct meaning through a textual voice instead of a physical address, and is founded on the weak concept of context and meaning as a function of the text. The perceived limitations of observational film brought about the third style in documentary film, the interview-oriented documentary, a style that modifies the concept of direct address. Witnesses and interviewees provide commentary directly to the camera, and the Griersonian narrator and authoritative voice-over are absent. The interviewees require less validation than the “voice-of-God” and, in that sense, diffuse the authority among many voices. Because of this, notes Nichols, the voice of the interviewee is more unequivocally accepted as “truth” and, he argues, the witnesses are often selected to support the master narrative of the filmmaker. Self-reflexive documentaries, developing in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, attempt to address the perceived problem of subjectivity inherent in all previous styles of documentary film by acknowledging both the position of the filmmaker, interviewee and viewer and, in the film itself, that the text and the narrative of documentary are fundamentally not unproblematic. In other words, they self-reflexively point out that the documentary does not offer a “whole truth.”

Nichols’s works also offer in-depth analyses of ethnographic film. Visual anthropology works to be “on the scene” and/or “get behind the scene” of other cultures; “[i]t has proven less adept,” however, “at looking behind its own scenes, at the staging of its own representations and in debating what this activity represents as a symptom of our own cultural situation.” Nichols, concurring with what other film scholars have noted about the general discipline of anthropology,
argues that ethnographic film and cinematic representations of “Others” often “gain motivation from narcissistic, voyeuristic, sadistic, and fetishistic mechanisms.” Whatever the driving motivation, Nichols observes that the creators/viewers and objects of ethnographic film must nonetheless remain distinct entities. He writes,

The separation of Us from Them is inscribed into the very institution of anthropology and into the structure of most ethnographic film. They occupy a time and space which ‘we’ must recreate, stage, or represent.  

Furthermore,

Between the ‘here’ of anthropology and the ‘there’ of another culture stands the border checkpoint where the passage of our bodies there and representations of them here is governed by the standards and principles of fieldwork and location filming. The separation of ‘here’ and ‘there’ is sharply demarcated.

Despite the ethnographic film’s claim to capture the life of the object “as it really is/was,” this mode of documentary is nonetheless cut, edited and formatted to follow the classical narrative structure. “What is somewhat remarkable,” observes Nichols,

is how often ethnographic films repeat familiar cinematic qualities and narrative structures, without, apparently, knowing or acknowledging it. The canonic story form in the West of an introduction to characters or setting, presentation of a disturbance or puzzle, a goal-oriented line of causally linked
situations and events, followed by a resolution to the disturbance or solution to the puzzle recurs in ethnography as well as fiction.\textsuperscript{160}

According to Nichols, the ethnographic film typically follows a recognizable chronological pattern, is organized into a dramatically relevant sequence of shots and events, and contains well-orchestrated performances from social actors and characters who are recruited to “play themselves” – attributes of any fiction film.\textsuperscript{161} This narrative structure is remarkable for Nichols because “real life” and classical story arcs seldom correlate, yet ethnographic film paradoxically conflates the two. The reason behind this contradiction, argues Nichols, lies in the film’s attempt to balance the sense of otherness and strangeness created by distance: “The canonic narrative format, in either fictive or expository forms, produces a sense of the familiar.”\textsuperscript{162} As such, ethnographic films remain simultaneously interesting and comfortable, fulfilling the audience’s fetish for strange places and otherness while not abandoning all remnants of Western codes and practices.

“Documenting” Maud Lewis: The Role of Narrator and Witnesses in \textit{The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis}

\textit{The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis} commences with a scene of painted tulips and the sound of a warbling flute and pizzicato strings. “A poet is without honour in his own country…”\textsuperscript{163} begins some disembodied, unidentified voice. The speaker is referring to Lewis, who then appears on screen, identified only by her first name, painting and wiping her brushes. Several other voice-overs are heard – a man, speaking of “Lewis paintings,” and a woman, giving

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\textsuperscript{160} Nichols, 1994, 72. \\
\textsuperscript{161} Nichols, 1988, 51. \\
\textsuperscript{162} Nichols, 1994, 73. \\
\end{flushright}
her impression of the artist’s “fabulous” artwork. The wandering flute melody slows to an end, and the rollicking theme and introduction of the CBC’s 1960s television series *Telescope* burst onto the screen. The viewer is bombarded with images of eyeballs, beautiful women, clowns, giraffes and moonscapes, as the giant lettering of “TELESCOPE” streams across the screen. Until this point, Lewis, the subject of the show, has been sandwiched between bland ambiguity (signaled by the notably absent last name) and the neurotic image-explosion of the *Telescope* introduction.

Enter Fletcher Markle, *Telescope*’s host and narrator, whose calm authority comes as a much-needed relief after the disjointed polarity of the opening segment. The introductory music stops abruptly as Markle appears on screen in a head and shoulders shot. He is a poster-boy for 1950s professionalism – hair neatly parted and slicked back, clean-cut charcoal suit, white shirt and tight black tie (fig. 11). He faces the camera squarely and looks directly at it. With a knowing smile and a nod, he begins,

> Once upon a time, in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, there lived a little girl named Maud, the harness-maker’s daughter. Maud loved sleigh bells, and buggy rides and big black oxen, and she painted Christmas cards and sold them around town for five cents apiece.165

At this point, the camera retreats slightly, showing Markle from the waist up, standing comfortably with one hand in pocket, as he continues,

> She was very happy, and then her parents died, and she went to live with an aunt in Digby. She still painted a little but she

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worked very hard around the house, and after she grew up she became badly crippled with arthritis and she was very lonely.\textsuperscript{166}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image11.png}
\caption{Fletcher Markle}
\end{figure}

\textit{(Image: The Once-Upon-A-Time-World of Maud Lewis, DVD, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1965.)}

Here Markle moves from easily verifiable statements (location, parental occupation) to more subjective claims. The tracking of the camera is used to support Markle’s assertions regarding Lewis’s emotional status; he is now framed by two large “Telescope” signs, reminding viewers of the program’s authority. Markle’s narrative shifts again, and he begins to walk towards the camera, all the while maintaining direct eye contact with the television audience. “Now,” he says, signaling the change, “not far away there was an illiterate farm hand named Everett Lewis and he was lonely too. And just like in a storybook when Maud and Everett met, they suddenly

\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Once-Upon-A-Time World}, narrator.
weren’t lonely anymore.” Markle stops in front of a large reproduction of one of Lewis’s oxen paintings. Glancing over his shoulder once to reference the work (fig. 12), he turns

Figure 12 Fletcher Markle


his attention to Lewis’s artistic career:

She’s never had a lesson, never been to an art gallery, never met any other painter. Tourists discovered her bright bold work, took it home to admiring friends, and now she can’t keep up with the demand…Maud Lewis, her primitive art, and her husband Ev, right after this message.168

Markle then smiles, and the camera fades to a commercial break. Markle returns every now and again to narrate, having established a rapport with the audience, and occasionally interjects into a scene as the voice-over commentator.

Every aspect of the scene described above is meant to evoke a sense of authority, credibility and trustworthiness. Markle’s appearance is professional, his posture open. He invites the viewer to recognize the truth of his narrative by addressing the audience with direct eye contact. He is personable and likable; he engages the audience by smiling at us, gesturing, and walking towards us. His relatively casual manner allows him to be accessible, but he speaks with self-assured confidence that dismisses any doubt or incredibility. Nichols notes that “[t]he professional commentator’s official tone, like the authoritative manner of news anchors and reporters, strives to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as distance, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience.”169 Here Markle has all the authority of a news anchor. His name appears immediately following the title of the show, and he is the only person in the documentary who has the privilege of addressing the audience directly. As an anchor-figure, Markle also has the backing of the CBC and all the authority that comes from being associated with the national and government-funded news network. As for the quality of distance, Markle himself is far removed from the actual filmic scene; the Telescope studio, without any reference to place or time, is decidedly not located in rural Nova Scotia. Markle’s intimate knowledge of Lewis, therefore, seems remarkable; he appears as the omniscient observer, privy to all information, capable of assessing Lewis’s happiness, loneliness and desires. In fact, Markle is the lens through which the audience sees Maud Lewis. Just as we must look over his shoulder to see the painted oxen, we can only access the artist through Telescope’s host.

But the narrator/host cannot bear the burden of authority alone. Witnesses or interviewees, writes Nichols, elaborate on the premises set forth by the narrator. “They also contribute emotional and moral proofs,” he continues,

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we align ourselves for and against characters according to their apparent credibility. By giving us access to ‘ordinary people,’ the narrator’s own moral status rises: their testimony invariably bears out the narrator’s thesis; the viability of our access to knowledge through the locus of He-Who-Knows is reconfirmed.\textsuperscript{170}

In this case, Markle-the-omniscient cannot tangibly connect with Lewis. The \textit{Telescope} studio, while imbuing the host with a sense of authority, is too sterile to deliver the needed ‘moral proof.’ \textit{Telescope} requires witnesses on the ground to bear out Markle’s testimony. For this, he introduces three individuals:

Markle (off-screen): Two of the most enthusiastic admirers of Maud Lewis are Claire Stenning…

Stenning: She’s just fantastic. I just can’t understand why she hasn’t been found sooner.

Markle (off-screen): And Bill Ferguson.

Ferguson: Well, Maud and Everett Lewis are unique characters, although Nova Scotia is full of characters, these two are quite unique among characters.

Markle (off-screen): Claire Stenning and Bill Ferguson are co-owners of Ten-Mile House in Bedford, near Halifax. They frame Maud Lewis paintings and sell them for ten dollars and have arranged with her to print reproductions of some of her work. Also in Ten Mile House is the studio of Jonathan Cook, a leading Nova Scotian artist and another Maud Lewis admirer.

\textsuperscript{170} Nichols, 1981, 202.
Cook: Mrs. Lewis’s work is valid, it’s uh, a direct statement of things experienced or imagined and very forthright in their statement and use of colour and her drawing – definitely works of art. Possibly minor works of art, but still, she has something to say and she’s saying it.\textsuperscript{171}

Whereas Lewis is initially identified only by her first name (“Once upon a time there lived a little girl named Maud…”\textsuperscript{172}), Markle introduces Stenning, Ferguson and Cook by their full names. In each case, this introduction is followed immediately by details about their respective professions, assuring the audience that they are qualified to comment on Lewis’s life and work. The three interviewees are also filmed in their workplaces – Stenning and Ferguson in the gallery and Cook in the studio – which gives further weight and authority to their testimonies. Despite the effort to establish credibility, these three are markedly different from Markle. Their status as witnesses is conspicuously inferior to that of the \textit{Telescope} host. Each is seated at a thirty to forty-five degree angle to the camera, looking beyond the lens to some unidentified point behind the camera. It is as if each is holding a conversation with the disembodied Markle, or at least responding to his off-screen prompts. The witnesses, unlike Markle, are distanced, once removed from the audience. They serve instead as accessories to the narrator, affirming the status of “He-Who-Knows” and, to paraphrase Nichols, reconfirming his knowledge and thesis.\textsuperscript{173}

Despite the differences between the narrator and the witnesses, there are still some basic stylistic commonalities. First, it is clear they are each addressing someone; the camera remains fixed on the speaker for the duration of their interview/narrative. This mode of filming/interviewing, however, does not extend to Lewis. She and Everett are rarely shown

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Once-Upon-A-Time World}, narrator, Ferguson, Stenning, Cook.
speaking directly to the camera. Their narratives were recorded at a different and unspecified
time, and then transposed onto footage of the artist and her husband performing their daily
activities. One scene, for instance, shows Lewis seated in her chair, working on a winter
landscape. While the camera focuses on her smiling face, Lewis’s voice is heard from off-screen,
reminiscing,

Them days, gone by. We used to have one them old-fashioned
phonograph round records, play a round record, with a great big
horn. I can see it now. Used to sound funny too, squeaky, used to
sound squeaky… all those old-fashioned songs like that. There
were no cars in my days, all horses, hardly any bicycles them
days… never used to see them.174

As the disembodied voice of Lewis speaks, the Lewis on-screen finishes her painting, stands up,
walks about the house and checks the stove. “I remember a time when you used to go out for
buggy rides,” she continues,

Father used to have a span of horses, go for all day, and them
buggies with the fringe top, I remember that plain, span of
horses, them was the days. More travel faster now, you can go a
long ways with the car. And the horses, they wouldn’t trot or
nothing, they would just walk, couldn’t make them run. We
used to go on the beach and have picnics. I remember them days.
The whole family. Family, they’re all gone now.175

Here the twittering flute music of the introduction picks up again as Lewis begins to speak of
fringed-top buggies. The camera cuts away from her as well, moving to a series of her paintings

that coordinate well with the dialogue (horses, beaches and picnics). This filmic treatment of Lewis – the voice-over, the filming of her at work and in the home, the happy-go-lucky musical score – mark her as the subject of the film. She is not assigned so much authority as Markle or the interviewees, nor does she require it. She is the interesting subject, needing only to be or exist, hence the footage of her painting and tending to the house. The audience need not take her as seriously as Markle and the others (cue flute music), as we are assured that the narrator and interviewees will return to interpret once Lewis’s segment is over.

“Expository documentaries” writes Nichols,

rely heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word… images serve a supporting role. They illustrate, illuminate, evoke, or act in counterpoint to what is said… [The commentary] serves to organize these images and make sense of them… The commentary is therefore presumed to be of a higher order than the accompanying images. It comes from some place that remains unspecified but associated with objectivity or omniscience. The commentary, in act, represents the perspective or argument of the film.176

*The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis* follows a logical pattern of descending authority: the host/narrator (Markle) is the highest source of authority, followed by interviewees/witnesses (Stenning, Ferguson, and Cook), and concluding with the subject (Lewis). Given the structure of the film, the commentary of the top two tiers is the basis of the film. In other words, what Markle and the witnesses postulate about Lewis and Folk forms the episode’s core thesis, and the images of Lewis and her voice-over narrative are used to support the argument put forth in the commentary.

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Nostalgia in *Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows*

The usual filmic preamble is absent from the beginning of *A World Without Shadows*; no phrases like “National Film Board presents…” , “a Diane Beaudry film…” , or “in cooperation with…” appear on the opening screen. The soundtrack, a slow-moving piano score, begins, and the National Film Board’s iconic green symbol appears on screen, but quickly disappears in less than one bar of music. An image of Maud Lewis’s three black cats painting then abruptly comes on screen within the next beat of music, its feline subjects, red and yellow tulips and white daisies filling every inch of the frame (fig. 13). The viewer is left alone for a few seconds to be stared down by the unflinching (and slightly unnerving) gaze of three sets of yellow eyes, but the voice of the narrator soon interjects and speaks directly to the viewer. “You know how you keep reliving your childhood inside of you?” she asks, “a place to go when things aren’t goin’ right?”177 She pauses after this question, leaving the viewer to reminisce about his/her own

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177 *A World Without Shadows*, narrator.
younger days, and then answers: “Ah well, that’s what you see when you look at one of Maud’s paintings – it’s that world from when you were a child, with no shadows in it.”178 As the narrator finishes, the camera zooms in on Maud Lewis’s signature in the left-hand corner of the painting. The title of the documentary, “a world without shadows,” is then added beneath the signature, in a lower-case, childlike, handwritten script. As the camera zooms, the music picks up and moves into a less melancholy piano and guitar refrain to accompany the signature and title of the documentary.

Every aspect of this opening scene is designed to draw attention away from the documentary status of the film, to pull the viewer in on friendlier terms, and to render it a more personal and trustworthy experience. The National Film Board symbol at the beginning quickly reminds the viewer that this is indeed a government-sanctioned, educational document, but it disappears so rapidly that it is soon forgotten as the painting appears and the narrator begins to speak. The lack of any other official titles makes the film seem more like a personal creation or artistic montage than a typical full-length documentary. The narrator is put on closer terms with the audience by addressing them directly, asking a friendly rhetorical question, including them in the dialogue, and by speaking informally. The question about childhood memories is meant to connect the narrator, the viewer and the featured artist on a personal level, the assumption being that everyone has some happy childhood moment (one without shadows) to reflect upon. Thus the introduction to A World Without Shadows creates the impression that the film does not work to impart fact, but rather shares a deeper “truth” with the audience, one based on personal memory and recollection.

As the title frame fades, a still shot of a sunset over a winter landscape appears, a country lane lined with wooden posts in the foreground. The narrator laughs introspectively, “I guess this

178 A World Without Shadows, narrator.
is a reminiscence, is what you’d call it,” she then says. A more rapid succession of still images follows, more winter scenes of fields and county churches, meant to be, one presumes, a photographic illustration of Lewis’s “world.” This short scene is an extension of the purpose of the introduction. The laughter puts the viewer at ease, reminding us that the narrator is a human being, capable of laughter among companions or friends. The way the statement is prefaced with “I guess” renders the delivery informal and makes the narrator seem slightly indecisive, and therefore again more human and trustworthy. It is ambiguous what the “it” is that constitutes the source of the reminiscence; it is unclear whether she refers to the film itself or her own account, leaving the viewer to vaguely assume that every aspect of the film is somehow linked to memory. It is this unspecified linkage to memory, however, and particularly the use of the word, “reminiscence,” that is the film’s major source of authenticity. “Reminiscence” implies a direct connection to Lewis through memory, suggesting that the narrator was a witness to her life, and therefore is a reputable and trustworthy source. The images that accompany the narrator’s words work to connect memory to place, affirming that the narrator’s ‘reminiscence’ is connected to a real-life time and setting.

The film underscores its authenticity by developing a unique persona for the narrator. The filmmakers eschew the conventional “newscaster” voice, that familiar, well-articulated, unaccented, smooth-toned professionalism of most documentary narrators, in favour of something more regional. The narrator’s grammar is, at times, incorrect, her pronunciation casual, her descriptive statements are simplified and uneducated (“her arms sort of shrunk up”), and she

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*A World Without Shadows*, narrator.

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*A World Without Shadows*, narrator.
occasionally repeats herself absentmindedly. These idiosyncrasies and inflections create the sense that the narrator is herself a member of the Folk. This gives credence to the notion of “reminiscence,” for the more she sounds “of the people,” the more believable the film’s claim to a basis in memory.

*A World Without Shadows* takes a less linear pattern than *The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis*. It follows a poetic-driven structure rather than the logical, commentary-based system, artistically mixing real-life images, Lewis paintings, and music in no particular order. The image of a Lewis painting of children in a playground, for instance, is accompanied by the sound of children’s laughter. These sounds then merge with the next shot – real-life footage of children in a schoolyard, engaging in the same playground activities as portrayed in the preceding painting. In another instance, the narrator comments that “Maud’s world was never any bigger than sixty miles in either direction, but she got so much out of it. The farmers in the Annapolis Valley, the fishermen and scallopdraggers at Digby, and inland the lumber roads with the oxen coming down them.”

Throughout this narrative, a painting of farmer’s fields is followed by real farm footage, seagulls over a port by gull sounds and harbour shots, and a painted fisherman by his real-life counterpart. “Sync sound/image shots of sequences [such as those described above],” notes Nichols, “serve to anchor characters within their milieux and to realize (make real) the surface manifestations of their social identity (dress, physique, gestures, etc.).” In this case, the synchronous sound of children laughing or of gulls calling, with the corresponding images

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181 See Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory and Politics* (Routledge: London, 1995), on the use of regional accent in film: “The device is a familiar one from many television documentaries where the voice of the dominant culture is usually accorded the authoritative role while regional voices, often reduced to signs of some local quirkiness or eccentricity, occupy clearly subordinated positions.”(111)

182 Interestingly, the end credits indicate that the voice-over commentary was written by Carry Cowling and read by Niki Lipman, further clouding the foundations of the ‘reminiscence’ and undermining the narrator’s position as the source of truth and memory (so long as viewers take time to notice that well-buried detail).

183 *A World Without Shadows* narrator.
and the juxtaposition of the painting and live footage, heightens the impression of reality. The same approach is taken with the lengthy “Tomorrow’s Flowers” song:

…Running, jumping, and laughing still, they always have and they always will.
Needing nothing from yesterday, tomorrow’s flowers will fade away.

Patchworks columns and dandelion hill, brown-eyed cattle and Farmer Bill.
Sowing the hillside, guiding the till, images seen from a windowsill.

Up and down tides, nowhere to go, Sailboats hurryin’ to and fro.
Chasing the seagull, climbing the breeze, stop in the moment and set them free…

Each verse is accompanied by the appropriate imagery, illustrated through both Lewis’s paintings and photographs and footage, and enhanced occasionally with the ambient sounds of nature. For the viewer, then, this poetic sequence is experienced through a variety of senses, eliciting an emotional response and bringing the film seemingly closer to the experience of the “real.”

As seen above, A World Without Shadows is more concerned with poetics than exposition, foregrounding an aesthetic mode rather than a formal structure. Unlike The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, this film contains no narrator in an authoritative suit and tie. Whereas the former treatment of Lewis presented itself as distanced and relatively unbiased, A World Without Shadows revels in connectivity and involvement. Its very raison d’être is its omniscient yet highly personalized connection with the artist. Again, unlike The Once-Upon-A-

\[184\] Nichols 1981, 203.
Time World of Maud Lewis, *A World Without Shadows* does not rely on the observations of witnesses to validate the thesis of the narrator, but depends on a balance of commentary and images that inform and validate one another. It does not so much tell the viewer about Lewis as it seeks to re-create the experience of the Folk, a believable impression of their existence, and in so doing, to advance its portrait of the artist.

**Drama and Narrative in The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis**

A black-and-white photograph of a young Maud Lewis appears on the screen in an opening scene of *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*. As the camera moves across the photograph, showing a smiling Lewis looking down on a cat at her feet, the slow musical score featuring a piano and violin begins. “As a child,” the narrator begins, “Maud was healthy and secure.”186 The camera then moves over a painting of a farmer in a field, a horse pulling a plow, and a red-roofed church. “Later in life,” she continues, “Maud painted scenes of her youth, as if she wanted us to know that there was something in her past worth remembering.”187 The sound of horses’ hooves is heard, and the scene shifts to real-life footage of a man leading a team of oxen over a tilled field, a grey farmhouse in the background. “Maud’s childhood was a place in which everyone had a place and purpose,” notes the narrator, as we see a pair of horses pulling a farmer and a leveler, following shortly by a painting of a farmer among his animals – a rooster, horse, and cow – surrounded by colourful flowers and bushes. “[S]he was a beautiful child,” adds Phillip Woolaver in an interview, “a lovely child, with a serene look and a high level of intelligence staring out from the depths of her eyes.”188

185 *A World Without Shadows*, song.
186 *The Illuminated Life*, narrator.
187 *The Illuminated Life*, narrator.
188 *The Illuminated Life*, Woolaver.
This scene, one of many of this type in *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis*, is illustrative of the film’s tone, and also points to its methodological approach. *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* is somewhere in the middle ground between the expository nature of *The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis* and the poetic presentation of *A World Without Shadows*, using a combination of the filmic mechanisms already discussed to establish its authority. First, it employs a narrator in “voice-of-God” mode, an omniscient, articulate woman, who possesses not quite the telecaster persona of Markle nor the rusticity of the *Shadows*’ narrator. She is knowledgeable and authoritative, yet sympathetic and reverent in her treatment of Lewis. Second, the various witnesses in the film – especially Woolaver and art historian Cora Greenaway – all support and validate the narrator’s thesis. The hierarchy of narrator-witness-subject is maintained here as in *The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis*; only the narrator enjoys the privileged task of speaking directly to the audience, while the witnesses address a point off-camera. Third, the film also relies on synchronous sound and image to heighten the sense of reality, while simultaneously using a folksy musical score to promote a pleasurable viewing experience.

But while this film contains certain stylistic elements of its predecessors, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* also incorporates dramatic reconstruction into its presentation. Interwoven throughout the film, in amongst the archival footage, interviews and artwork, is a collection of dramatized scenes of Lewis’s life. The film in fact opens with a dramatic sequence, as an actor representing a middle-aged Lewis makes her way through the night to Everett Lewis’s small house (fig. 14). The scenes are generally short – snapshots of Lewis as a child walking with her mother, in a boat with her brother, sketching with her father, or of her later in life, painting indoors, driving with Everett Lewis in his Ford, smoking by a window. The actors themselves rarely speak – once at the beginning when Lewis introduces herself to Everett, and only once later
when Everett is peddling Lewis’s artwork. The narrator speaks above the dramatization, making a comment to set up the scene, allowing the actors to demonstrate the point, and then continuing the narrative.

One reenactment, for instance, portrays the child Lewis with her older brother, Charles Dowly. The actors representing the siblings play together in a stream, Charles pulling a small boat containing his sister and a German Shepherd. “Maud began to feel that something was wrong with her,” the narrator begins. “She grew quiet and shy and turned to her brother Charles, who became her closest friend.” The dramatic reconstruction then fades to a painting of a boy pulling a boat and a girl seated within behind a white spotted dog. As the camera closes in on the painted figure of the girl, the sound of children’s voices begins. A painting of a red schoolhouse appears on screen, the camera angle widening gradually to reveal the larger art piece – a painting
of children in a schoolyard, one group holding hands in a circle and a girl with a skipping rope. The medley of children’s voices solidifies into a rendition of “Ring-around-the-Rosy.” As the children sing this playtime song, the painting melts into a reenactment scene. The dramatic footage forms an exact replica of the painting – complete with the twirling circle of children, the girl skipping rope, and the schoolhouse in the background. Only in this scene, the actor representing the child Maud Lewis is seated apart and alone. “It was at school Maud realized that she would spend the rest of her life as a curiosity,” the narrator explains as the camera moves in for close-up of the young girl, “her mother tried to hide a noticeable curvature of her spine with pretty dresses.”\textsuperscript{190} Eventually all the other children file into the school, the dramatized Lewis waits until the end, and then trudges in behind them. The reenactment ends, and a photograph depicting Lewis with her parents appears on screen. “By the time Maud was ten, a deformity in her chin was obvious,” notes the narrator, as the camera focuses on the young artist.

The second example of a dramatically reconstructed scene is set between two interviews. The scene begins with archival footage from the CBC, showing a patron purchasing a painting from Lewis for five dollars. An interview with one of Lewis’s neighbours begins in voice-over,

Maud didn’t make her money from her two and five dollar paintings…They played the pity scene, more than anything. And it’s sad to say it that way, but if people would donate ten dollars, twenty dollars, sometimes people would leave a cheque for a hundred, two hundred dollars. That’s where they collected their money from. And the more that they got, the more that they wanted, and just like anybody else, especially in the old days. The older people, they didn’t trust nobody… They had all kinds

\textsuperscript{189} 
\textit{The Illuminated Life}, narrator.

\textsuperscript{190} 
\textit{The Illuminated Life}, narrator.
of money but really they thought they were still poor, poor, poor.
And that’s what they showed people.\textsuperscript{191}

As the neighbour finishes his interview, a sombre oboe melody is heard and the dramatic reenactment begins. Everett Lewis-the-actor walks from the doorstep of his small house to the mailbox on the side of the road. As he opens the box and retrieves the mail, the music changes—quickening and becoming more suspenseful when a set of strings joins the oboe. Everett stands near the mailbox, opens one of the letters, removes and pockets the enclosed cash, and then drops the remaining letter to the doorstep (fig. 15). “Orders for paintings arrived in the mail, cash enclosed, trusting in Maud Lewis,” the narrator observes, “but Everett had never quite escaped his past of poverty. He couldn’t resist the temptation.”\textsuperscript{192} The reenactment ends with Lewis

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figures/everett-lewis-reenactment.png}
\caption{Dramatic Reconstruction of Everett Lewis}
\end{figure}

(Image: \textit{The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis}, directed by Peter D’Entremont, DVD, National Film Board of Canada, 1998.)

\textsuperscript{191} \textit{The Illuminated Life}, neighbour.
\textsuperscript{192} \textit{The Illuminated Life}, narrator.
standing dismayed over the fallen letter, but further explanation is provided in an interview with Cora Greenaway:

Her life was not good, definitely not. It was miserable, but, nevermind. If she got fed up with what was happening in the house, she just pulled out her brushes and her paint, and she painted one of these lovely scenes, where everything is all roses.80

These dramatic reconstructions are authenticated by being seamlessly interwoven with other filmic elements. They appear alongside archival footage and photographs of Lewis, paintings, and interviews so as to become more firmly attached to the idea of “Truth.” Reenactments in-and-of themselves are problematic – they smack of fictionalized drama rather than documentary fact. But if they can, however, assert their basis in “history,” or “reality,” they may be more easily accepted when presented in documentary form. For instance, the childhood reenactment justifies its portrayal of the young and lonely Lewis by mirroring the playground painting, rendering the dramatization less arbitrary or abstract for viewers. The same is true in the reenactment where Everett steals the money, a scene that anchors itself between two witness accounts. Furthermore, throughout the film no distinction is made between footage of the real Lewis and these dramatized scenes. Here the actors interact directly with the historical figures, blurring the lines between the real of the reconstructed.

The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis is structured and organized more like a fictional film than a documentary, following the conventional cinematic sequencing of introduction, problem/crisis, and resolution. The dramatic reconstructions serve to illustrate the narrative and enhance the cinematic experience. Reenactments, in short, look good on film. Frequently,

193 The Illuminated Life, Cora Greenaway.
however, the reenactments in *The Illuminated Life* push the envelope beyond what is historically verifiable or justifiable for the sake of the narrative. The dramatic sequence, for instance, depicting Everett Lewis effectively stealing from his wife is not supported by the witness accounts or any archival footage. While one neighbour references Everett’s stinginess and Greenaway notes that Maud Lewis life was “not good,” neither make the claim that Everett was a thief. Nor does the narrator cite her source for the description of Everett’s lack of “resistance to temptation.” This scene instead bears out the narrator’s thesis by enhancing the notion of Lewis as the innocent victim, and simply makes for better viewing, increasing the suspense throughout the problem/crisis section of the film.

**Differencing Maud Lewis: Rescuing the Folk Through Film**

“Aesthetic folklore,” notes McKay, “emerged in the turn-of-the-century period as a powerful legitimating force, but it did not reorder the assumptions of the field.” Elitism formed the cornerstone of the relationship between those in the cultural-know and the unsuspecting Folk. Discussion of Folklore or Folk artifacts was based on the “supposed ability of middle-class and often academic men and women to rule on the inherent worth or worthlessness of folk traditions on the basis of their “authenticity” within a closely defined canon and on an “objective” evaluation of their aesthetic worth.” Thus Folk objects may circulate as artistic pieces rather than cultural artifacts, transitioning, through the approval of the urban middle-class collectors and art connoisseurs, from rurality to the gallery. Discovering the artist-genius in the Folk, however, was no easy task. “Vanishing, isolated in small cultural enclaves, as reclusive as nocturnal animals, the Folk had to be hunted down and then coaxed into parting with their essence,” writes

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194 McKay, 22.
195 McKay, 22.
McKay. The quest for the Folk’s true cultural essence, however, was a worthy and romantic endeavour. Middle class collectors became “emissaries of modernity… brav[ing] dirt, isolation, and social danger to retrieve the true nuggets of authenticity concealed in the primitive countryside.”¹⁹⁶ In fact, “the middle-class collector,” writes McKay, “was a kind of recording angel, rescuing the cultural treasures of the international Anglo-American Folk from the uncomprehending local people who accidentally harboured them”¹⁹⁷ – rescued, placed in the gallery, and preserved for eternity.

“Some tourists passing through dropped in with one of the Lewis paintings, looking for a frame, and we were so delighted with what we saw that we had to find out where they came from and we hunted her down,”¹⁹⁸ speaks the disembodied voice of gallery owner Ferguson within the opening seconds of The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis. For Ferguson, Lewis was the unknown, the elusive and the undiscovered. Hidden somewhere in the Folk landscape of Nova Scotia, her work was passively waiting to be unearthed by gallery owners and artistic connoisseurs, its creator rescued from the ignorant depths of rural anonymity. “She’s just fantastic,” Stenning exclaims to the camera, “I just can’t understand why she hasn’t been found sooner.”¹⁹⁹ This implies, of course, that Lewis needed to be “found” – that previous to the gallery owners’ “discovery” of her work, she existed in obscurity, flying beneath the radar of the Fine Art world, unrecognized by those surrounding her: “A poet is without honour in his own country,” an off-camera, unidentified voice muses at the beginning of The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, “and that’s the way it was with Maud; she needed outside recognition before the people in this area were aware of her work.”²⁰⁰ In this case, the Nova Scotian Folk were oblivious to the

¹⁹⁶ McKay, 29.
¹⁹⁷ McKay, 22.
“cultural treasure” within their midst – blithely unaware of the talent beneath their very noses.

For art collectors like Stenning and Ferguson, the discovery of Lewis’s work led to the preservation of an untapped cultural resource, ripe for collecting (salvaging), preserving (framing), and distributing to the world (selling for ten dollars apiece).\textsuperscript{201} The documentaries themselves also pose as “recording angels,” venturing into rural Nova Scotia, armed with camera equipment and microphones, seeking out their elusive subject to be captured on film. The documentaries are in effect “rescuing” Lewis from obscurity and local ignorance, preserving her Folk essence on film and bringing her work to a national, and more sophisticated, audience.

**The Camera Lens and the “Other”**

Cultural anthropologists George Marcus and Fred Myers argue that objects accumulate cultural value only when they are contextualized and written into larger “histories.” Furthermore, they argue, cultural value is constructed by creating or emphasizing difference – the driving idea behind the twentieth-century anthropological and artistic fascination with the primitive “Other.”\textsuperscript{202} As discussed in earlier chapters, the concept of difference is fundamental to the construction of the Folk, a people meant to represent the antithesis of industrialization, urbanization and modernization. As such, Folk Art accumulates cultural value only so long as it is inscribed in the narrative of the Folk. The moment that Folk Art becomes simply “art,” it has lost the all-important paradigm of difference, ceasing to stand for a larger history. Folk Art gains value by the fact that it is representative of and created by a people fundamentally different from “Us,” the viewer. As long as Folk Art exists as a category, and as long as the Folk themselves

\textsuperscript{201} *Once-Upon-A-Time World*, narrator.
\textsuperscript{202} Marcus and Myers, 19-27.
persist as a notion in the minds of the bourgeoisie, we will always have a separation of Us and Them, demarcated and given value by the paradigm of difference.\textsuperscript{203}

The paradigm of difference is perpetuated in \textit{The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis}, \textit{Maud Lewis: A Life Without Shadows} and \textit{The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis} because the three documentaries reflect a desire to capture the primitive and the peculiar on film.\textsuperscript{204} For the filmmakers, Lewis fulfills both categories. As a member of the Folk, she represents the primitive, the “Quaint-not-quite-like-us, the Pleasant peasant.”\textsuperscript{205} Her physical disability, however, satisfies the second category, a fetish for the strange and bizarre. “My first thoughts on Maud, and I hate to say it, way of some type of sub-human creature,” Woolaver explains in \textit{The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis},

who was so grotesque-looking that she was far more than a figure of fun, she spent her time, by reputation, hidden, you know, in a corner somewhere. And probably would have felt better behind the stove, and that was easily sort of transposed into a mental deficiency, which wasn’t so, you see. I’d like to see a doctor write about what was wrong with her.\textsuperscript{206}

As Woolaver speaks, a photo of Lewis appears on screen. The camera zooms in on her misshapen hands. Here, much like Woolaver’s initial impression, we see Lewis first as an object of curiosity, the films’ frequent close-ups on her physical disability leads the viewer to question – How did she paint with those hands? What is wrong with her? – before we have the opportunity to consider her artwork. Even the CMC speaker feels compelled to describe Lewis in the opening lines of his speech as a woman “who was physically challenged and who lived in primitive

\textsuperscript{203} See Keil, 265.
\textsuperscript{205} Keil, 265.
surrounds,“207 thus drawing attention to Lewis’s difference before the museum crowd moves on to the exhibition.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, Lewis is treated differently on film from other witnesses and interviewees. She rarely speaks directly to the camera, her words heard instead in voice-over, recorded at a separate time and setting. The camera tends to follow Lewis in her “natural habitat” – scenes of her at work, painting, moving about the house, and performing chores. It is as if the camera has simply happened upon her, or as if she was oblivious to it, creating the illusion that the viewer is witnessing the “real life” of the subject. The lens is the proverbial “fly on the wall.” This seeming discretion, however, renders the gaze of the viewer uncomfortably voyeuristic. Through the camera, we stare into Lewis’s private life, enter her home, survey the effect of her disability on her movements or her ability to hold a paintbrush, and critically scrutinize her relationship with Everett. This invasive microanalysis of her life further works to separate Lewis from the other interviewees, all of whom are afforded some distance and discretion. The witnesses and the narrators are also allowed to address the camera and speak to the audience in real-time, aligning them with the viewer instead of with Lewis. The overall effect creates a sense of binary opposites, that We (the viewers and the witnesses) are different from Them (Lewis), dividing along the lines of sophisticated/rustic, modern/primitive, normal/unnatural, and urban/rural.208

Furthermore, the camera effectively stalks Lewis throughout the course of the three films. The language of film itself is rife with hunting metaphors; filmmakers “shoot” a scene and “capture” the subject on camera.209 In The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, Ferguson

206 The Illuminated Life, Woolaver.
207 The Illuminated Life, CMC.
208 See Palmer and Lester, 93.
even notes how he “hunted her down” after coming across one of her paintings.\textsuperscript{210} The presumption of Ferguson and the filmmakers is that Lewis \textit{needs} to be hunted down, that she exists somehow outside of civilized parameters, and that it will take the qualities of a hunter – patience, stealth, tenacity – to bring her into the gallery or onto the screen. This again emphasizes the sense of difference, in this case, Lewis-the-prey and Us-the-hunter.

**Conclusion**

Documentaries are “never clear windows onto ‘reality’” Nichols observes, but rather are “active fabricator[s] of meaning,”\textsuperscript{211} no closer to achieving “truth” than their fictional counterparts. Few filmmakers, contends Nichols, readily admit that “through the very tissue and texture of their work that all filmmaking is a form of discourse fabricating its effects, impressions, and point of view.”\textsuperscript{212} The real problem, however, lies in how we view these documentaries. Rosenthal argues that we (the viewers) “continue to see documentary as a special genre, a useful tool that provides some clear and necessary observations about the world.”\textsuperscript{213} We tend to consider documentaries as purveyors of objective truth, and, as a result, we frequently use documentary films as an educational tool or reference, a perfectly clear and unbiased glimpse into the subject of inquiry. The danger therein is that the viewer is then less questioning of the cinematic apparatuses used to assert the “truth,” allowing, in this case, the reproduction of the seemingly contradictory concept of the Folk artist-genius to pass unnoticed and unquestioned.

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Once-Upon-A-Time World}, Ferguson.
\textsuperscript{211} Nichols, 1988, 49.
\textsuperscript{212} Nichols, 1988, 50.
\textsuperscript{213} Rosenthal, 18.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

Maud Lewis is a ubiquitous presence in the Maritimes. Growing up in New Brunswick, only one province removed from Lewis’s home of Nova Scotia, I was always semi-aware of her life and work; it seems that she is engrained in our collective Maritime consciousness, ever-present in tourism promotion, always appearing in someone’s calendar collection and reoccurring frequently in the media. For Maritimers and those visiting from elsewhere, Lewis represents all that is appealing in the concept of the Folk. Her work offers a romantic vision of the rural countryside and seacoast, complete with farmers tilling fields, children playing outside one-room school houses, and fishermen in the harbour. Her life itself exemplifies the greater traits of the Folk – she is quaint, honest, hard-working, pitiable in her disability, but also courageous in overcoming it. She, in essence, lived the life of the Folk, removed from the evils and temptations of the modern world, untainted by urbanity, and isolated in rural Nova Scotia. Yet for all her Folkishness, we also view Lewis in terms of transcending ordinary relations to her world. She is an artist, and thus above the Folk – masterful, inspired, gifted, and singular. As such, Lewis is a prime and yet under-analyzed example of a “Folk artist-genius.” While she has received little scholarly attention, she nonetheless attracts the gaze of filmmakers and cultural institutions, resulting in the set of three documentaries that formed the subject of this thesis. I have used The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows and The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis as vehicles to access the concept of and scrutinize the contradictions within the Folk artist-genius concept.
Maud Lewis, as the Folk artist-genius, is representative of the contradictions inherent in the categories of “fine art” and “Folk art,” and validates Marcus and Myers’s assertion regarding the “powerful irony” in the traffic between art and anthropology. Lewis’s work seems to simultaneously occupy the categories of art and artifact. On the one hand, she is stereotypical artist-genius – gifted, prodigious, spiritual, possessing almost clairvoyant vision, at once transcending all that is mundane, brutal and deplorable of the Folk reality. On the other hand, she is the quintessential Folk, both typically and ideally rustic, quaint, untainted and innocent. The “powerful irony” here is that Lewis is, paradoxically, both of and above the Folk. This is an ambiguous position; as demonstrated by the exhibition of her work at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1996, she is concurrently scrutinized and fetishized as an anthropological specimen and yet hailed as a “master,” beloved as “Canada’s most renowned folk artist.” As outlined in Clifford’s art-culture system, we cause her work to flit indecisively between masterpiece and artifact, between art and anthropology, never fully coming to rest in either category. Furthermore, the camera’s love of Lewis has naturalized this paradoxical ambiguity. The systematic conflation of “fine art” and “Folk art” is lost within the authoritative codes and structures of documentary film, and each of The Once-Upon-A-Time World of Maud Lewis, Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows and The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis is allowed to perpetuate the inherent contradictions in the concept of the Folk artist-genius.

214 Marcus and Myers, 20.
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