

# The spiritual sense in the new auteur cinema of Québec

## Abstract

This article argues that the decline in religious belief and practice in Québec does not mean that a sense of spirituality has disappeared from Québec cinema. On the contrary, a new generation of auteurs has emerged whose search for values is more internalised and personal than that of their predecessors. In their case we find a spiritual sense expressing itself in certain broad thematic patterns. Three such thematic groupings (which overlap and intermingle) will be looked at: firstly, religious parody, which masks an underlying metaphysical anxiety; secondly, allegories of time and death, which explore special states of consciousness in search of a meaning for life, and thirdly, an attraction to alternative belief systems, especially those associated with ancient Amerindian and Inuit cultures. These thematic tendencies do not reflect any philosophical consensus among the film-makers concerned, but express rather a certain contemporary mood which is of more than a passing interest.

The cinematic landscape in Québec has changed radically in the last few years. The most striking novelty has been the arrival on the scene of a genre-based cinema with a host of new directorial names [\[1\]](#). This development, driven by the two main funding agencies and a group of producers closely associated with them, has the avowed aim of achieving popular success and an increased audience share for Québec films. In this it has so far been extremely successful. Québec cinema is now more popular with its home audience than ever before. Its success has come not only from exploiting a certain number of traditional Hollywood film forms and styles, but also from keying into popular home grown television genres, especially situation comedies. In this latter style, there have been a number of alert and lively films, which are of better quality than earlier attempts at popular cinema – for example, those in the 1970s (Barrette 2004). The impact made by the popular approach has aroused some anxiety that it might have negative effects (essentially in the allocation of state funding) on the more serious auteur cinema that has hitherto distinguished Québec. Such fears may well prove to be founded, but it is also true that, alongside the new genre approach, there remains a strong strand of auteur film-making, which has accounted for some of the most memorable films of recent years. Some of the film-makers involved emerged slowly at the end of the 1990's as part of what was then called *la relève* (Denis Villeneuve, André Turpin, Catherine Martin, Manon Briand), others have followed different paths to emerge a year or two later (Louis Bélanger, Bernard Emond, Benoît Pilon, Lucie

Lambert). Although not forming a homogeneous group, all these film-makers have preoccupations and interests that distinguish them from their genre-based contemporaries. The relationship of this generation to the classic Québec cinema of the 1970-90 period is one determined by the change in the socio-political, and indeed global, context. The emphasis in the first Québec cinema was on nation-building, on projecting a picture of Québec as a distinct society, and on creating a sense of communal identity. The new auteurs, however, live in a different world with different challenges. Many of the aims of the Révolution Tranquille have been accomplished and there is much less of a fervent belief in a collective national project. Today's film-makers seem the heirs of a social revolution that provides no clear guidelines as to what to do now. They find themselves back in a world of individualism in which they have to find their own values and construct a life project without the support of a great cause. This explains why their films differ from those of their predecessors in their choice of significant characters. Strikingly, the protagonists of some of the key films of 1970-1990 were young adolescents : MON ONCLE ANTOINE (Claude Jutra, 1971), LE TEMPS D'UNE CHASSE (Francis Mankiewicz, 1972), and LES BONS DÉBARRAS (Francis Mankiewicz, 1980) among others. This character-type was symbolic of the great project of national self-renewal projected by the films. The children were clear-eyed judges of the weaknesses and inadequacies of the society they were born into, but also carried the promise of a better future. Old people were also prominent — LES DERNIÈRES FIANCAILLES (Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, 1973) — because the Révolution Tranquille grounded the legitimacy of its project in the long history of French Canada and its deep roots in the past. In this symbolic scheme, old people represented the memory of the nation and continuity from the past to the future. In the films of the younger generation the character profile is quite different. The very young and the old are absent and there is a preponderance of thirty-something adults. It is as if we are confronted with the Benoîts and Manons of the 1970s, now grown up to find their society radically altered. It is no longer rural and backward, but urban and more affluent. Hunting trips and drinking sprees are no longer the preferred leisure pursuits but have been replaced by fashionable cafés and international travel. This shift in character-paradigm and social focus holds good for both the genre-based cinema and the auteur cinema. But thereafter, the paths and the problematics diverge. The genre cinema of situation comedy postulates that life in a world of relative plenty is good and the young adult characters act out their good fortune with grace and charm. Their interests may not be entirely limited to « la chasse au bonheur » and affairs of the heart, but these are their predominant concerns. The auteur film-makers, by contrast, are more troubled by the evolution of society since the Révolution Tranquille. In their case, there is a greater link with the social vision of the first Québec cinema, particularly in its emphasis on the worth of ordinary people, including the

poor and underprivileged. Most of the films of Bernard Emond, Benoît Pilon, Louis Bélanger, and Catherine Martin celebrate people working in humble jobs, or living ordinary lives, in a way that poses tradition and community as sources of value. There is thus a tendency (not necessarily present in all cases) to see the arrival of the consumer society as having destroyed many traditional values and encouraged the naked pursuit of wealth and self-interest. A recurrent theme in many of their films is the satirical denunciation of the materialism and hedonist life style produced by the new technocratic form of capitalism. In *UN 32 AOÛT SUR TERRE* (Denis Villeneuve, 1998) the Japanese capsule hotel is a parody of soulless modernity. In an early scene of the same film, all the trendy young people in a café reach simultaneously for their mobile phone when one ring tone is heard, a nice vignette of programmed behaviour, while the good Samaritan who helps the heroine on his way to the airport is consumed by the frenetic anxiety of the modern businessman, a slave to his agenda. In *UN CRABE DANS LA TÊTE* (André Turpin, 2001) the equivalent of the Japanese hotel is the gadget-controlled house of a foppishly rich entrepreneur, who epitomizes arriviste narcissism. More seriously: the thesis of the whole film is that the jet-set life of an artistic photographer leads to moral corruption and failure of human relationships. The crab in the head is also a sickness in the soul. Similarly, *GAZ BAR BLUES* (Louis Bélanger, 2003) shows the commercial take-overs of global capitalism destroying the fabric of communities, and disrupting family relationships. But given the socio-political *impasse* in which the younger generation finds itself — no clear project to replace the Révolution Tranquille — their moral critique is no longer framed in terms of a public ideology. It is rather translated to the private sphere and internalised as a life crisis of a broadly spiritual kind. Not for nothing are characters involved in allegorical journeys, encounters with death, or turn to the wisdom of ancient aboriginal beliefs. They almost all have transcending experiences of some kind, a personal epiphany that leads to a profound life change. It is true that generally the seriousness and importance of the issues is sometimes masked by irony and parody, but this is a well recognised feature of (post-) modern art, and brings its own benefits in the richness of texture and attractiveness of tone of many of the films. Whether this phenomenon can be read as a response to the spiritual vacuum left by the decline of religious belief and the influence of the Church in Québec society is a moot question. It could as easily be argued that established religion has always offered a home to beliefs that were more generally spiritual than the formal doctrine of the Church. What such beliefs found in religion was an eloquent form of expression, with a powerful narrative and a metaphorical language of great beauty. A striking example in the cinema of 1970-90 is *JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL* (Denys Arcand, 1989) which uses the story of Christ to project a message that is more one of spiritual humanism than being strictly religious. Equally, spirituality has always found means of expression without recourse to the

strict codes of religious faith. Here one might quote, in earlier cinema, *ON EST LOIN DU SOLEIL* (Jacques Leduc, 1971) and the more recent *L'ÂGE DE BRAISE* (1998) by the same author. It is no doubt true, however, that the decline of the Church as a major institution has meant, despite Arcand's example, that few film-makers now engage directly with religion, except in the form of parody (as we shall see), but draw more usually on wider types of spirituality. There is a problem in defining adequately those wider types as we encounter them embedded in films, or other works of art, because the phenomenon is quite all-pervasive and fluid. Spirituality finds expression not only in the many different religions in the world, including primitive belief systems, but also in ancient myths, allegory, dream, philosophy and everyday reactions to nature and human life. The artistic imagination is no less fluid, and, outside the strict bounds of any one doctrine, will draw freely on an eclectic repertoire of stylistic figures. Consequently, the classification of films into three categories, offered below, is simply for convenience of analysis. Characteristics discussed under one header will frequently recur under another [2].

**Parodies of religion : MATRONI ET MOI and LE PETIT CIEL**

Throughout history, parody has been used as a strategy for denouncing religion, but it has also served as a device for expressing religious uncertainty in a masked form. Given the new generation's taste for comedy and satire, it is not surprising to find that for those film-makers who openly deal with religion, it is the ironic and quipping approach that prevails. The best known example is *MATRONI ET MOI* (Jean-Philippe Duval, 1999) based on the play by Alexis Martin. Martin is a key figure, as both writer and actor, in contemporary theatre and cinema and the considerable strengths of the film come in large part straight from his play. Ultimately, the transformation from theatrical to cinematic text has been skilfully done. Duval creates an appropriate and original visual style. His use of split-screen and other camera and montage tricks produces a specifically cinematic form of zany comedy that reinforces the masking effect. At the same time, his *mise en scène* in the final sequence subtly changes the view of religion suggested by the film as compared to the play. The stark problem that both play and film pose is the Nietzschean one of the « death of God », the question being whether there can be a morality without the underpinning support of religion. The question is tested by placing the doctoral student Gilles, whose thesis title is « La Mort de Dieu », in an unusual social milieu. He has to deal with a gang of hoodlums headed by Matroni where circumstances require him to make a decision which will condemn two men (and perhaps more) to death. The role played in the outcome of the debate by the proletarian, *joual*-speaking milieu in which Gilles finds himself is far from irrelevant, but can be left aside for the purposes of the present analysis. The main tension is one between opposing intellectual attitudes. Gilles represents one of these poles and his father, who appears late on the scene, represents the other. Gilles, played by Alexis Martin himself, is a

caricature of the naive and socially inept young intellectual who is unable to temper cerebral theorising with the lessons of ordinary common sense. The father is a criminal lawyer, who has had previous dealings with the Matrioni gang and is no stranger to compromise. His credo is that compromise and pragmatism do less harm in the world than moral purism. His long-standing ideological quarrel with his son turns precisely on Gilles' fervent espousal of moral absolutes and unrealistically high principles (the debate is reminiscent of Sartre's *Les Mains sales*). Now dying of cancer, he is prepared to sacrifice himself in a gun battle between the Matrioni gang and a rival one, to save his son (and others). This demonstration that moral relativism does not exclude courage and heroism leads to a reconciliation between father and son at the hour of death. What is unexpected, however, especially since atheism is part of the father's credo, is that his death takes on religious overtones. Several shots of the illuminated cross on *la Montagne* are intercut with his dying words, with nothing to show that this is meant ironically. His words about the supreme importance of gin tonic in life, and his legacy to his son of the recipe for the perfect gin tonic, are more ironic, parodying the ritual of the last will and spiritual testament. Before he dies, Gilles pours a few drops of gin into his mouth, a symbolic act that draws a distinction between the Passion of this atheistic *bon vivant* and that of Christ, who received only water, but there is still a tenderness in the gesture that moderates the derision. It is further moderated in his final speech about the virtues of gin where he develops a metaphor about a great tree growing from his body and dripping with gin instead of sap. Despite the continuing ironic twist, this tree cannot but recall the Tree of Jesse, connecting heaven and earth. It is not surprising, therefore, that a voice-over describes him dying *les bras en croix* while a high angle shot shows Gilles with his girl-friend Guylaine positioned at each side of the « cross » like a *pietà*. This ending is markedly different in tone from the more dramatic one of the play. There, Gilles wrenches out one of his father's eyes and throws it against a wall, above a door, where, as the final stage direction says : « *Le triangle avec l'oeil de Dieu ensanglanté apparaît* » (Martin). Here God's place in the universe [3] would seem to be that of a violent and wrathful God who presumably has little to offer to human life. The ending of the film is altogether softer in tone and would seem to suggest, on the contrary, something closer to the notion of a divine power who offers consolation and a meaning to human life. The initial proposition that God is necessary as a useful device simply to underpin human morality has thus been subtly enlarged, at the last moment, to suggest a deeper significance. This by no means represents a conversion to Christianity *in extremis*, but it adds a significant nuance to the intellectual position adopted by the film. The difference between *MATRONI ET MOI* and *LE PETIT CIEL* (Jean-Sébastien Lord, 1999) is that, in the first, the reference to religion, although crucial, is a late occurrence, whereas in Lord's film it is sustained and uninhibited in its parody. Here many aspects of religion are

subjected, not so much to irony, as to irreverent mockery. The sub-title could almost be « *Elvis Gratton et Dieu* », because of the role played in it by the actor Julien Poulin and the similar tone of derision. *Le Petit Ciel* of the title is a bar-cum-nightclub where the décor makes kitschy use of religious trappings, and *habitués* tend to make exaggerated confessions of faith from a small stage. The thirty-something owner, Jacques, discovers he is dying of cancer and has to make sense of this cruel fate. Perhaps as a therapy, he acquires a new girlfriend — who is pregnant by one of many former lovers — and tenderly exchanges secrets and vows with her in a confessional, which is part of the club's furnishings. We quickly discover that Jacques is not the only one set to die. The main narrative thread of the film concerns the constant intervention of the afterlife in human affairs — in most cases to cause death. Revealingly, along with Jacques' cancer, the other way the victims die is in car accidents, the main cause of death of young men in the real world. In keeping with the overall tone of the film, the deaths are carried out in comic mode by incongruous emissaries from the other world (a Cupid, for example, who uses his arrows for deadly as well as amorous purposes). But there is also a charming little girl among the victims, who makes a touching farewell speech to life from the small stage. This is the first slip of the mask, alerting the viewer to a more serious underlying anguish. The Heaven to which the victims go after death is a major element in the religious parody, since there is not one, but two Heavens. The first is full of ladies in the traditional black garb of mourning, but who are otherwise jolly. They live in a sunny orchard full of colour, where the names of humans below are tied on fruit trees, the label removed when one has died. No doubt this gender-specific Heaven, presided over by Micheline Lanctôt, is a tongue-in-cheek gesture to feminism. Heaven 2 is much grimmer, a cavern in a bad state of repair, with the roof falling in. No angels are in sight. There is rather a raggedy group of down and outs, who would not have been out of place in Bunuel's *VIRIDIANA*, presided over by Jesus (played by Julien Poulin in Elvis Gratton style). God, in this Heaven, is a fresh-faced boy of thirteen — an ironic reversal of the traditional image of God as a benevolent old man — whose divine interventions on earth provoke explosion, fire and cataclysm. When Jacques duly dies, it is to this Heaven (which seems also to be Purgatory) that he is transported to await judgment. In the meantime, a friend, who had died previously, has submitted a special request to Micheline Lanctôt in the other Heaven that he and Jacques should be allowed to return to earth to begin life again, by being re-born as the twins which Jacques' girlfriend is carrying. This extravagant series of events leads to an ending which is even more unexpected than that of *MATRONI*. In a tableau of great beauty, the pair of friends walk into a lake in a serene landscape, through which their return to earth will take place. We hear cries of childbirth on the sound-track as they slowly move through the calm water — an eloquent metaphor for re-birth, fusing the waters of parturition with the waters of

baptism and new life. A final scene shows the young twins with their parents, but with the adult voice of Jacques speaking to the viewer from within the body of a five year old. In all the annals of religious parody, there are few cases in which a hidden sub-text emerges with such finely controlled power and in such extreme contrast with the prevailing tone. While it is now clear that the extravagant mockery masks anguish about the frequent and seemingly arbitrary death of young people — the reference group of the new generation — it is possible that many practising believers could find the chosen fictional strategies to be offensive, if not blasphemous. In addition, the idea of metempsychosis — the re-birth of the soul at death in another body — is a belief enshrined in many ancient myths, but not an orthodox Christian doctrine. It is thus hard to argue that the contradictory tropes employed in the film can be easily reconciled within a religious frame of reference. But to viewers for whom spirituality can function in a wider frame of reference, the film is an intriguing exercise in polyphony. Like *MATRONI*, the film text uses different registers and tones because its author cannot fully accept the discourse of religion, while, at the same time, wanting to borrow something of religion's power to bring coherence and consolation to life. In this respect, it is a revealing example of the new generation's search for alternative forms of idealism. **Allegories of time and death :**

**UN 32 AOÛT SUR TERRE and POST-MORTEM** Death is a biological fact and as such can appear in many film narratives without any particular implication. It is when it prompts a meditation on the meaning of life that it becomes a spiritual or religious theme. It is not only literal death that can prompt such a meditation. In many films there are other states of expanded consciousness involving an « absence from the world » which have a similar resonance. The hero of *UN CRABE DANS LA TÊTE* has an other-worldly experience in deep-sea diving that haunts him thereafter [4]. It is also remarkable how many states of coma — a kind of death in life — feature in current films (including *UN CRABE*), as if this were a condition particularly conducive to metaphysical questioning. And when characters recover from a coma, they become Lazarus figures who have had experience of what lies beyond. One way of reading the hero of *UN CRABE* is to see him as a Lazarus crippled by his experience. A variant of Lazarus involves a transcendent experience of time where characters move into another time dimension and come back changed from this encounter. *UN 32 AOÛT SUR TERRE* (Denis Villeneuve, 1998) highlights the disruption of time in its title. Following a car crash, the heroine Simone (Pascale Bussières) is projected outside normal time. She wanders in a dazed state for two days, and even when she takes a key decision and embarks on a series of actions, these very concrete events still take place in another time scheme, as the dates which unfold on the screen indicate. The first day of her new life is the 32nd of August, and equally non-existent dates in August continue to unfold. Not for many days does she finally re-join normal time in the month of September. The first

Lazarus-like effect on the heroine is an estrangement from the surrounding social world. The viewer is made to experience her point of view as she witnesses — from another place in her mind — the noise, frenetic pace and the ugliness of the urban environment, and the triviality of its hedonistic values. This prompts her key decision, which is to have a child — a decision of obviously symbolic import. Against a world consumed by self-gratification and the present moment, a child represents the continuation of self and commitment to future life. The crisis in personal experience and life project is matched by a change in material location, through a journey to the remote desert of Salt Lake City, which is introduced into the film initially as a joke. The friend to whom she turns to father her child (Alexis Martin) imposes the condition that conception should take place in this distant and unlikely place. The quizzical, joking manner in which the two protagonists conclude their bargain, in a long tracking shot along a back alley, is very French Nouvelle Vague in style. The Martin character revealingly has a still of Jean Seberg from *A BOUT DE SOUFFLE* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959) on the wall of his flat, and this particular form of ironic romantic comedy is an important ingredient in the film, ensuring that the symbolic overtones are not too heavy-handed. But while the humorous vein continues when the couple arrive in the desert and discover that it is not propitious to the mechanics of conception — « *pas très bandant* », says Simone — this does not prevent this strange location from taking on imposing associations. The camera dwells on the vast expanse of glittering sand in a way that makes it seem other-worldly. The aerial shots reduce the couple to tiny figures in comparison. By clever cutting, they appear to move seamlessly from one panoramic vista to another, enhancing the sense of an infinity of space. The sheer otherness of the desert gives it a grandeur and physical immediacy which contrasts with the artificial and false milieu the couple has left behind. Even if death lies in wait for humans in such a place, as the couple discovers when they stumble on a calcinated corpse beside a burnt out car, Simone is led to see the desert as a place she does not want to leave : « *je ne vois pas de raison de partir d'ici* ». What is suggested is that the confrontation with extremity has restored something to the couple's lives that was lacking in the consumerist rat race. In symbolic terms there is an echo of the Biblical picture of the desert as a place in which the Truth is revealed. The discrete cosmic hint in the title — un 32 août *sur terre* — also becomes plainer. Freed from social trivia, the couple rediscovers the planet Earth, almost as it was in the beginning, empty and stripped down to its geological bareness. If not a place for conception, it is a place which delivers a deeper intuition of fundamentals. When the couple re-enter the normal world, it is logical that their allegorical journey should lead them to events that take on a higher significance. Philippe is assaulted by marauding hoodlums and ends up hospitalised in a deep coma. Simone nevertheless conceives her child with her unconscious lover. Her determination to perpetuate her life — the



objective of the journey — is realised, but in a more profound and poignant way than she originally planned, since it is now given overtones of resurrection. Philippe gives life not unlike the way Daniel, in a terminal coma, makes a gift of life at the end of *JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL*. We do not learn whether Philippe's coma, like Daniel's, is literally terminal, but the symbolic associations function in the same way. The spiritual message in this case seeks less support from religious concepts than the previous films, but the notion of life having a meaning beyond individual death is no less present in the resolution. *DEUX SECONDES* (Manon Briand, 1998) is another film that is based on a heightened experience of time. The *deux secondes* in this case refer to a fatal moment of hesitation on the part of the heroine, a downhill mountain bike racer, before she reacts to the starter's signal in a big race. This leads her to retire from the sport, fearing that she has lost the sharp reflexes of youth. In retrospect, it is significant that her hesitation occurs on a high mountain top, with the camera dwelling on radiant light on distant peaks, all of which could suggest a deeper perception, rather than uncertainty. But these initial clues are not strong enough to alert the viewer to anything extraordinary in her experience. The fabulous element only makes its appearance when the heroine's brother casually speaks of the theory of relativity of his hero, Albert Einstein. According to him, Einstein's theory, in certain circumstances linked to the speed of light, conceives of normal time being suspended and arresting the process of change and age. This thread in turn connects with a sub-plot in which a worldly wise Italian bike repairman recounts his experience of a suspended moment of time in his own career as a racer, which revealed to him the young woman who might have been the love of his life had he not ignored the signal and continued the race. The culmination of this metaphorical sequence of special moments occurs when the heroine meets her own Madonna figure, played by the same actress as in the Italian's tale. She works in the photo finishing department of a race course and prints out photographs of action arrested in mid-flight, suspending time so that it can be contemplated. The sublimity of the meeting is emphasised by the fact that the heroine approaches the office of the young woman through a maze of dark corridors, like Orpheus in the underworld. She discovers her Eurydice in a vista of light, when the first words that the vision utters to her visitor are: *deux secondes*. One can see how this symbolic scheme might have taken on associations of a quest for an eternal ideal incarnated in human form, but the film does not quite deliver this. The final freeze-frame of the film repeats the initial hesitation at the start of a bike race, but only to show the happy love of the two young women, rather than any notion of time transcended. Nevertheless, the film shows the appeal to the contemporary Québec *imaginaire* of metaphors of permanence and higher ideals. On the other hand, what is striking about *POST-MORTEM* (Louis Bélanger, 1999) is that it resolutely abstains from the overt use of the mythic that characterises the previous films, while being

concerned with an event that potentially bears even more spiritual and supernatural potential than they — what appears to be the actual death and real resurrection of a young woman. The structure of the film is that of a criminal investigation, and it uses strategies of concealment and delayed revelation that are familiar techniques of crime fiction. After a brief prologue showing the arrest of a middle-aged, subdued worker, Ghislain, for alleged rape, the first part of the narrative depicts the lively exploits of a young mother, Linda, whose after hours work is mugging men whom she has seduced. She then robs them of their credit cards and valuables, which she sells on to a middle-man in a crime ring. But the amused tone in which this is recounted turns sour when one of Linda's victims recovers prematurely and strangles her in fury. It is only some time later, during a second stage depicting Ghislain's mournful, solitary life as a morgue attendant, that we learn that the rape he is accused of has been perpetrated on Linda's corpse. We are even more surprised when we discover that Linda, although admitted to the morgue at least an hour after having been strangled, has been brought back to life by the rape. Although these revelations are in themselves highly dramatic, they are made in a low-key way which prevents them from becoming *coups de théâtre*. There is a deliberate slowness and incompleteness in the various « clues » that are released to the viewer which keeps the stylistic register of the film rooted in the down to earth and the everyday. The result is to thwart any supernatural explanation of the event that has taken place, whether religious or more generally mythical. The appeal to religion is also blocked when, at an earlier point, Linda angrily takes her mother to task for indoctrinating her young daughter with the Biblical account of the Garden of Eden, and, later, when asked by her mother what higher insight she had gained from her strange experience, she acknowledges nothing more than intense physical pain. Yet, however downplayed, it is clear that something well beyond the ordinary *has* happened. Although the filmic discourse successfully masks the notion of a « resurrection », a very similar outcome is delivered. Both main characters are transformed and redeemed by what they have gone through. Linda renounces her past behaviour and fulfils her long-held dream of living a purer life in the country with her daughter. Ghislain resigns himself to the loss of Linda but emerges from his social isolation to devote himself to good work in the community. In both cases there is a conversion that leads to goodness and personal wholeness. By placing more emphasis on the characters involved than on the event itself, Bélanger secularises the spiritual effect that is achieved. It is particularly significant that both characters are from humble backgrounds and speak the vernacular language of the people. With Ghislain, occupation and speech style are shown to be no barrier to cultural interests, since he is a knowledgeable collector of records of blues music. Linda, although seemingly without his broader interests, has nevertheless a sharp wit and intelligence and expresses herself in *joual* with

a vigorous eloquence. One might argue, therefore, that like Bélanger's later *GAZ BAR BLUES* (2003), *POST-MORTEM* has primarily a social message about human worth. But that would be to overlook the fact that there is no equivalent in *GAZ BAR BLUES* of the transfigurative passage through death — or death-like coma — that precipitates the change. However played down, the experience at the heart of the film is more resonant than an ordinary pragmatic decision to reform one's life. The power of the film is precisely that, and by restraint and careful imprecision, it delivers a quiet, controlled epiphany.

**Alternative belief systems : LE PÈRE DE GRACILE, MÉMOIRES AFFECTIVES and MARIAGES**

Just as the spiritual sense has often sought to use the language and narrative of Christianity to express itself, so throughout the ages there have been poets, novelists painters and other artists who have been influenced by other world religions or more ancient systems of belief. In Québec, Amerindian and Inuit ways of life and beliefs have always held an appeal to film-makers as to other artists — the work of Arthur Lamothe is an outstanding example — so it is not surprising to find the current generation of auteurs turning to these sources as well. It is not a question, however, of a literal adoption of such beliefs, but rather of a more general, sympathetic attraction to other philosophies of life. In *LA BEAUTÉ DE PANDORE* (Charles Binamé, 1999), the third of three films in which Binamé seeks to capture the confusion and disorientation of contemporary young adults, the final sequence concerns a symbolic journey by the heroine, here too played by Pascale Bussièrès. Escaping from Montreal in a trans-American bus journey, she makes a wayside halt at the Hopi reserve in the Arizona desert. After gazing at the primitive rocks, and exchanging a long glance with an old Hopi woman, she retrieves her case from the bus in a way, which signals that she has spiritually come home. After *UN 32 AOÛT SUR TERRE*, we recognise the symbolism of the desert and see how its resonance could be amplified by a welcome into the lives of an aboriginal people strongly rooted in a traditional community. But although the film is strewn with a plethora of evocative images — beginning with the mythic references inherent in the names of Pandore and Ariane, the two main female characters — these metaphors do not adequately lead on to the final sequence, for which nothing else in the narrative has prepared us. Although a strong pointer to the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, the quest for meaning in an ancient culture seems here to be too much a ready-made solution. *LE PÈRE DE GRACILE* (Lucie Lambert, 2005) is quite different in this respect, being characterised by a coherent and disciplined pursuit of its theme. Not only is the film unusual in the new wave of Québec cinema in having an adolescent as a protagonist, it is singular also in combining a documentary interest with a fictional quest for values, which again takes the form of a journey. Gracile is a young girl of about 12 who sets out to find her father who has fled the family home to live in *le grand Nord*. Her journey takes her first to a forestry camp, then to snow-covered

landscapes where she lives briefly with an Amerindian hunter and fisher in his simple tent. She moves on to Schefferville, a company town built to house iron ore miners before the mine was closed down, leaving the town to crumble slowly to a phantom-like state. Her journey ends in another snowy landscape of great beauty where she finds her father who is now living the life of a hunter. It is in the forestry camp that the film most obviously adopts a documentary mode. Forestry is shown as being highly destructive of this remote territory. The massive modern machines that tear up and chop the trees at relentless speed are similar to those seen in *L'ERREUR BORÉALE* (Richard Desjardins and Robert Monderie, 1999), which denounced the forestry industry for the environmental damage caused by its practices. As Gracile walks along the road around the camp, the intrusion of industry into what was once a peaceful landscape is starkly evident in the deafening noise and clouds of dust raised by passing trucks. Later, the same impression is conveyed by the long trains of hopper cars thundering past the small tent of the Amerindian hunter — a contrast of two vastly different ways of life. The loggers in the camp are presented in a way that recalls the classic film *LES BÛCHERONS DE LA MANOUANE* (Arthur Lamothe, 1962). In both cases, the emphasis is placed on the difficult conditions of the loggers' lives. They are separated from their families for long periods, with consequential emotional problems, demonstrating that forestry is a source not only of material damage but also of human unhappiness. However, Lambert has her own original style of presenting these life histories. The men rarely speak directly to the camera but are shown in mute « portrait » shots while they recount in voice-over the misery caused by their un-natural existence. The testimonies are also mixed and sequenced with a pleasing fluidity that gives this documentary statement its own distinctive mark. While the documentary thread runs through the whole film, increasingly it becomes clear that Lambert's main theme is a more spiritual one. As Gracile's journey proceeds, the people she meets reveal traumas in their lives that are deeper than the family problems of the loggers. Even in the forestry camp one of the workers speaks of the trauma caused by the protracted illness and death of his daughter as having left him in eternal despair. Similarly, the Schefferville section is dominated by the emotional breakdown of a man — a former prison guard — haunted by the death of a prisoner who was burned alive in his cell. The conclusive case is that of Gracile's father. When she eventually finds him and asks why he had fled, his only answer is that he had experienced inner problems that he could only escape from by moving away to a more remote place. Although such traumas might appear to be without social cause, the film's discourse associates them with the sickness of modern society, given over to materialism and depersonalised work. The antidote to the despair that modern life produces emerges in the figure of the Amerindian trapper, who incarnates the notion that aboriginal peoples have a way of life, a wisdom

and a set of spiritual beliefs that are closer to the natural order than the Western way of life. For him, the conscious continuity with his people's past, the judicious and respectful co-habitation with the animals he hunts — implicitly distinguished from the rape of the earth by forestry — amount to a philosophy of life that gives a certainty about the purpose of existence. This philosophy is spoken by the trapper himself, but it is also embedded in the structure and stylistic flow of the film itself. Although Gracile's journey is a physical one, it is even more an inner one and inclines to the form of a *rêverie*. Recurring images of her asleep, often accompanied by a whispering voice explaining the meaning of her dreams, draw the connection between her unconscious and the allegorical nature of her journey. So, as she moves forward, the image stream fills with elliptical flashbacks and flash-forwards that the viewer cannot immediately put in order. There are those of a woman outside looking up at the sky. There is a hand building a small Inuit-style cairn, as well as separately recurring images of a small island in the middle of a frozen lake, and of a man walking and fishing. We can surmise that the woman is Gracile's mother, but not until the end do we discover that the hand and the man are her father. Interspersed among all these are images of landscape and nature that are almost self-sufficient in their poetic beauty, but which slowly take on the status of objective correlatives for the deep theme of the film. These are pictures of the natural wilderness, which in its remoteness and stillness brings greater peace of mind than the harassed world of modern commerce in the south. Return to nature in its quintessential form is the lesson that Gracile learns in her part-real, part-dream journey, under the tutelage of the Amerindian hunter and of the whispering voice, which turns out to be that of an old aboriginal woman initiating her into the meaning of dreams and their power to bring serenity. Fittingly, it is her father — a Western man who has fled to another environment and another philosophy of life — who draws all the threads together. Like the hunter, he needed to discover and follow his destiny, and he too uses the language and symbols of aboriginal beliefs. He gives Gracile an eagle's feather as a totem to guide her in life, just as the old soothsayer had earlier given her a similar feather and spoken about its secret power. Similarly he says that he did not realise the meaning of his action in building the cairn until he read the shape of a wolf in it, which then became a clear message of his purpose in seeking a new life. The symbiosis between humans and animals is part of the aboriginal beliefs that the father seems to have embraced and that the film works into its texture. We thrice see a wolf running through the landscape, and when Gracile first enters Schefferville, a husky dog cautiously approaches to rub its head against her, a related symbol of the closeness of man and beast in this other world. Schefferville's importance in the film is that it shows this outpost of exploitative capitalism reverting to nature, with the animals that had been driven away returning to their reclaimed territory. The evocative power of the film at this point is

inter-textual as it recalls *LE DERNIER GLACIER* (Jacques Leduc, 1984), a film entirely devoted to the closing of Schefferville, which also ends with images of the town being restored to the natural inhabitants of the region, Amerindian hunters tramping through the crisp snow to visit their traps [5].

There is no neat conclusion to the film. What Gracile's relationship with her parents will now be, and whether she will return to her home in the south, are not questions that need be raised. The film is not really about family relationships or pragmatic decisions. It does not matter that we know nothing of the father-mother loyalties - at best we might say that the relative serenity of the shots of the mother might suggest acquiescence in the father's project. Nor need it concern us that Gracile's movements take no account of practical realities — she walks alone for many days over vast distances, sleeping rough, yet never seems dishevelled or afraid. The difference between her and the adolescents of classic Québec films is that she is not a real protagonist but more like the innocent child of the Romantic poets, observing a spiritual odyssey that she is too young to be implicated in, but which she renders meaningful for the viewer. *MÉMOIRES AFFECTIVES* (Francis Leclerc, 2005) was released within a few weeks of *GRACILE*, and it can only be a revealing coincidence that this film also involves mysterious murmurings in an Amerindian language on the sound track. And here too, the viewer is unable to understand the significance of this device until a late stage in the narrative. In addition to this, there are other important similarities with films that we have been discussing. At the beginning of the film the hero, Alexandre Tourneur (Roy Dupuis) is in a coma and declared clinically dead. Although he recovers, his memory is seriously impaired. But confused memories and mental images, even when in the coma, suggest that his close encounter with death has taken him into depths of his subconscious which hold a secret key to the meaning of his life. The hero therefore traverses the film as something of a Lazarus figure, pale, weak and mentally distanced from all around him, wife, sister and former lovers, but engaged on a search for the elusive secret. As in *POST-MORTEM*, the search is conducted through partial recourse to the conventions of a crime story. The hero's plight resulted from an apparent hit and run car accident and a police investigation is launched to find the driver. As the narrative unfolds, with intriguing intricacies and unexpected surprises, the pattern that emerges implies a social and psychological paradigm that is familiar from earlier Québec cinema. The hero first discovers that, despite having had a respectable professional career, his private life had been a disorderly one of drinking in bars and casual lovers — a pattern that fits the psychological paradigm of shameful behaviour masking some hidden trauma. The crucial final stage is the tracking down of an elder brother in Toronto, whose very existence was unknown to the rest of the family. This brother reveals that when, as young boys on a hunting trip with their father, he had protested about the father's rough treatment of Alexandre (insisting that the boy kill a

wounded stag — a ritual of manly initiation). When the father turned on the older boy, Alexandre shot and killed his father. To disguise their deed, the boys then contrived a fake accident in their canoe on the lake, in which their father appeared to have drowned. The theme from the earlier cinema which this narrative scheme strikingly recalls is that of *le père indigne*. One of the memorable incarnations of it is *LE TEMPS D'UNE CHASSE* (Francis Mankiewicz, 1972), in which a young boy accompanies his father and three other adult men on a hunting trip. Disgusted by the drinking and uncouth behaviour of his father and fellow hunters, the boy enacts, but only in his imagination, the shooting and killing of all of them. On the other hand, traumatic childhood memories of a drowning in a lake is a recurring motif in both Québec cinema and literature. Consistently with this kind of psychological and social paradigm, the hero's re-discovery in Toronto of his personal history releases him from his amnesia and the trauma that underlay it and provides a satisfying conclusion. The link with a previous phase of national cinema by no means invalidates the theme, which is one of universal significance and is re-worked here in an original way, in a film of great visual distinction. It is nevertheless interesting that Leclerc builds into his scenario preoccupations that echo those of other new auteurs (it is relevant that the script-writer, Marcel Beaulieu, was also responsible for the scenario of *UN CRABE DANS LA TÊTE*). These are signalled when in the hero's conversations with those closest to him (wife, daughter, lover) they suddenly show signs of amnesia also. The condition takes on a general applicability where everyone is subject to frailty of memory and personality changes. This notion is given a kind of theoretical foundation in a scene with the hero's doctor and a hypnotist. The latter claims that, under hypnosis or in a coma, an individual's memory can be invaded by the memories of others, so that their personality is no longer totally under their control. There is an affinity here with ideas explored in *POSSIBLE WORLDS* (Robert Lepage, 2000) where Lepage plays with the notion of an individual, in special states of mind, being able to live a double life or multiple lives. His hero is associated with two women played by the same actress (a device also used, for not dissimilar purposes, in *DEUX SECONDES*), illustrating the blurring of frontiers between the self and other consciousnesses. But in Lepage, the idea of multiple selves is seen as enriching. Entering an expanded state is like falling asleep, which in turn is compared to immersion in the sea, metaphors for inner exploration. In *MÉMOIRES AFFECTIVES*, on the contrary, the examples we see of other characters being affected by memory loss are cases of eccentric and disturbing behaviour. The example quoted by the hypnotist — a young woman finding herself with the memory of a dead Japanese soldier from the second World War — does not seem, to offer very enriching possibilities [6]. Perhaps this is why Leclerc does not follow this path very far, but turns instead to the more positive motif evoking the Amerindian way of life. All but one of its appearances are in the form of the muttering voice on the sound

track, which recurs sufficiently enough to suggest that the hero is seeking the true roots of his identity in an earlier primitive existence, far removed from the debased life he had led in his modern milieu. The link is made specific at the very moment of his discovery of the source of his hidden trauma when a sudden final image appears on the screen of an aboriginal hunter in a forest with bow and arrow. The release from trauma allows him to reclaim not only his individual self but also a larger identity, connecting him to an ancient way of life lived close to nature. The theme is developed here much more elliptically than in GRACILE, nor is there, as in Lambert's case, any specific association of Amerindian life with a superior wisdom having therapeutic powers. Unlike the psychological one, this paradigm is perhaps too briefly sketched in to be altogether satisfactory. But the interest in a timeless and universal human memory, and the attraction to an ancient, primitive culture, are a further indication of how the new auteurs are drawn to an intuitive or spiritual philosophy of self. This is certainly the case of MARIAGES (Catherine Martin, 2001), undoubtedly one of the master works of the new generation. Like some of the films of the previous generation, notably J.A. MARTIN PHOTOGRAPHE (Jean Beaudin, 1977), the film is set in at the end of the nineteenth century in a rural environment in which the Catholic church holds complete sway over every aspect of village life. What the film portrays is the revolt of a young woman against the oppressive doctrines of the Church, partly by straightforward disobedience, but more profoundly through a sensuous and intuitive awakening to values that belong to a deeper world of fable, legend and apocryphal belief. The whole legendary ambience is set by the framing device of two folksongs [7] sung at the beginning and end of the film. The first, *La Belle en prison d'amour*, is a ballad of ancient times, sung by an itinerant minstrel as he walks towards the camera. Through costume, camera movement, location and the archaic vernacular language of the ballad, we are immediately placed in an a-temporal atmosphere, in which past and present co-habit. The same is true of the folksong that the minstrel sings (without being seen) during the closing credits. It is an even older song, *La Passion de Jésus-Christ*, a medieval version of the Passion which, as we shall see, fits better into a legendary frame of reference than a Christian one. The *Belle en prison d'amour* is Yvonne, the younger of two adult sisters in a family of four other children, and a niece of 14 who is just reaching the age of puberty. The family is bereft of a natural head, since the mother is dead and the father has remarried, although living nearby. The family head has therefore become the stern elder sister, who disapproves of Yvonne's wandering in the woods and swimming naked in the river, and plans to send her to a convent and a life of strict religious devotion. The two sisters clearly represent polarities of coldness, conformity and severity confronted with warmth, openness, and sensuality. The other forces in the film cluster round these opposite poles. The Church and the social order are the implicit allies of



Hélène, the elder sister. Those of Yvonne are her father and his second wife Néomie, and especially Maria, a gypsy-like *guérisseuse*, who lives in a shack in the woods and possesses strange powers based on ancient witchcraft. If not an Amerindian, as in other films discussed, she uses magic spells and totemic objects in a similar way and fulfils a similar role of soothsayer and guiding spirit. Néomie also deals in dreams. In a section entitled *Le rêve de Néomie*, she sees Yvonne in a wedding dress climbing a hill to a distant vanishing point, and resolves to make her a real wedding dress, not for an actual wedding in view, but as a portent of what she sees as Yvonne's destiny. Maria approves of this, describing Yvonne as *faite pour l'amour*. She also reveals to Yvonne that her mother committed suicide by drowning herself in the local river, and that the love of her parents had been so intense as to shock the local people. Love and passion are a transgression of social and religious propriety, but receive the blessing of the two women who draw Yvonne into another world of intuition, dream and second sight. The most startling event in the film also guides Yvonne in this direction. Her mother's body has to be disinterred because the local cemetery is to be moved. There is great public awe when the body is found to be in a perfect state of conservation. It is moved to lie in the church, where visitors can view it. Yvonne's father objects to his former wife being made a public spectacle in this way, presumably seeing it as an intrusive religious ceremonial. Yvonne, however, spends long vigils by her dead mother (who died when Yvonne was too young to remember her), forging a silent filial relationship with her beyond death. Subsequently she has two comforting visions of her dead mother appearing to her in the woodlands, and rests her head on the mother's breast on the second occasion. Her final vision is of sending her mother's body, on a shrouded raft to float away down the river at nightfall. Obviously in defiance of the Catholic burial that had been planned, this is a style of burial ceremony that is associated with ancient cultures and myths. It suggests a symbolic reunion with the forces of nature, reflecting an instinctive form of spiritual belief in Yvonne that escapes the rigidities of dogma and doctrine. The confrontation with death is thus, as in UN 32 AOÛT and POST-MORTEM a fulfilling, rather than a fearful, experience. It confirms the heroine in a choice of values and a course of action. When the marriage Yvonne plans falls through, she runs away to take up a life in the woods, living in Maria's shack and smoking a pipe that Maria had given her — hinting at the inheritance of her shaman-like powers. She also wears the velvet dress that her mother was to have been buried in, so there is a perfect conjunction of *deuil de la mère*, matrilineal inheritance, rebellious action and benevolent supernatural powers. The higher powers of nature are again involved in the bold climax. In the woods, Yvonne seeks to summon her departed lover by using a witchcraft ritual originally practised by Maria; his handkerchief is placed in a circle of stones, with lit embers at the four points of the compass. A great wind springs up and her lover falls on her

from above, as if from the sky, and they slowly settle into a pose of *gisants*, with a freezing of the image and a blurring of the sand patterns around them like a halo. It would be possible to interpret this unusual image as evoking an ideal union in death. Catherine Martin, in an interview, however, (Loiselle, 2002) conceives of the character living on after this hallucinatory incident, but says that nothing is known of what happened to her later. In this case, we would have to read the sequence as depicting an imagined reunion, transcending absence and distance, caught in an image of suspended time. In either case, there is an underlying belief in the transcendence of the spirit triumphing over the dictates of a harsh society and an oppressive religious order. The over-riding theme of the film is that the spirit is synonymous with nature. What gives it its organic form is the strong vein of pantheism — an intuitive feeling that there is a symbiosis between nature and human life [8] — that runs through it.. Hence the plural form of the title, which refers less to possible civic marriages than to the underlying sense of union with nature and all the other benevolent forces associated with it : Maria, the mother and the woodlands. Probably the key image is one of Yvonne standing naked by her open window, looking out on a summer night. The wind whirls the curtains in a voluptuous pattern round her body, while her wedding dress hangs behind her. This is a dream of nuptials with the night and the woods more than with a man. The wind is the same supernatural wind that, in the climactic scene, answers her magic spells. *La Passion de Jésus-Christ* that is sung over the end credits can hardly, because of its position, be called a major element in the film's meaning. But it cannot be entirely ignored either, given its theme of the crucifixion, the central symbolic event of Christian belief, in a narrative which paints a forbidding picture of the religious order. The song tells a naive version of Christ's suffering, different from that of modern Christian doctrine. It speaks of Christ, after forty days in the wilderness, drinking a glass of white wine and eating a segment of orange. He foresees his crucifixion as bringing an apocalyptic disorder to the world and causing the birds to shriek for vengeance for the death of the Saviour. It is thus a non-orthodox Passion which retains all the pathos and spirituality of Christ but treats him more as a pantheistic god of nature. He is hymned and borne to his tomb by angels, but his disciples are the birds who fear the destruction of the natural world. In effect the primitive theology of the song expresses what is universal in the Biblical narrative, the transcending of death and suffering. As in films discussed earlier, the Christian story is invoked, not for its doctrinal significance, but for its resonance and idealism, which blend with the freer form of spirituality that pervades the film. The archaic language and tone of the song recall those of *La Belle en prison d'amour* and end the film on the same note of timelessness. The impression we are left with (prolonging that conveyed by the final freeze frame) is that, beyond the particular society and time which the film depicts, there is an enduring life of

the spirit. **Conclusion** What the new auteurs have in common does not make them a collective film movement, nor even a conscious philosophical tendency. The films in question are all individual works which can be appreciated in their own right and on their own terms. But the affinities they share tell us something about the present historical context, which is worth more than passing attention. The great artistic and imaginative qualities of all the films, it should be added, suggests that Québec cinema has a new generation of film-makers who are worthy of the same admiration as their predecessors.

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## Notes

[1] Of course, this new wave has not swept the board clean. Some of the best-known names of 1970-90, such as Denys Arcand, Micheline Lanctôt, Pierre Falardeau, Léa Pool and Jacques Leduc are still very active.

[2] Nor is the selection of films exhaustive. Other films, such as those of François Girard, Robert Lepage, or Kim Nguyen's *LE MARAIS*, are very relevant to the themes discussed and could equally well have been included, and it should be added that there are other new film makers, like Denis Chouinard, who are concerned with themes quite different from those discussed here, while being equally worthy of attention. There are also many impressive new film makers in the documentary field. [3] The all-seeing eye of God within a triangle is often painted on the walls of Catholic churches, but « *ensanglanté* » seriously subverts its normal symbolism. [4] A similar kind of underwater incident occurs in *LA TURBULENCE DES FLUIDES* (Manon Briand, 2002).

[5] Gracile's trip through the town in a car recalls the magnificent tracking shot through the town in Leduc's film, also shot from a car. The difference is that Rivard's plangent song which is played over this sequence shows more mixed feelings in Leduc's case — the sadness of the departing mine workers interacting with the sense of a natural order being restored

[6] In literature, a similar theme is developed in the novel *Visions volées* by Rachel Leclerc (Boréal, 2004). There, also, entering another consciousness is seen mainly as a disquieting phenomenon. [7] I am very grateful to Catherine Martin who sent me transcriptions of these folksongs. They were drawn from the vinyl recording entitled *Acadie et Québec*, published by Université Laval, which is credited at the end of the film. [8] Throughout Antiquity, and up to the *Ethics* of Spinoza (1675), Pantheism was a much discussed, non-theistic, metaphysical belief. In the form it takes in literature

and the arts, however, from Romanticism to the present day, it is more typically the kind of intuitive response to nature that we find in MARIAGES.

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