

The New Québécois Cinema: Postmodernism and Globalization

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ABSTRACT: This essay will analyze how the theme of globalization's impact on Québécois identity is portrayed in André Turpin's film *Un crabe dans la tête*. The films of the new generation of Québécois filmmakers are particularly concerned with this theme and Turpin's work is a good place to start an analysis of this phenomenon. Additionally, postmodern narrative forms are sometimes used as a way of forwarding the paradoxes and contradictions of belonging to a proud embattled ethnic minority in a world where the global has become more important than the national. In some ways these are postcolonial films as they reflect a reality where the Quebecois have at last become masters in their own province. At the same time, globalization has meant a loss of their Québécois identity for many of its upwardly mobile thirty-something population. These issues are forwarded in Turpin's film which has been labeled as the first Generation X Québécois film. It portrays a generation which, with the freedom of the world at its command, finds it difficult to care much about a Québécois identity that it takes for granted. The love of open spaces, the attraction of the void, and the desire to lose oneself find their culmination in the film's male protagonist who evinces a very mobile psychological profile. At the same time there is a pull, for these young people, back to their land and their roots, which often becomes associated with the process of assuming adult responsibility.



***Un crabe dans la tête* (André Turpin, 1998)**

This article will analyze how the theme of globalization's impact on Québécois identity is portrayed in André Turpin's *Un crabe dans la tête* (2001). The films of the new generation of Québécois filmmakers (post 1990) are particularly concerned with this theme and Turpin's work is a good place to start an analysis of this phenomenon. Postmodern narrative forms are sometimes used by these filmmakers as a way of forwarding the paradoxes and contradictions of belonging to a proud, embattled ethnic minority in a world where the global is more important than the national. My book, *A Postmodern Cinema: The Voice of the Other in Canadian Film*, discusses the use of postmodern forms by Canadian filmmakers who are positioned outside of the mainstream. In one of the chapters, I analyze a Québécois film, *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) by Denys Arcand, and its reasons for using postmodern forms (119). These reasons are related to the historical position of the Québécois as a conquered people, with particular cultural narratives, and their existence in a modern Quebec, which is multi-ethnic at the present and becoming increasingly so. In *Postmodernism and the Quebec Novel*, Janet M. Paterson also traces the uses of postmodern forms in Québécois works. She claims that postmodern techniques have been used by Québécois writers since the 1960s (17).

Arcand is part of the 60s generation but *Un crabe dans la tête* belongs to what has been labeled the New Québécois cinema, made by a new thirty-something generation preoccupied with the impact of globalization on their lives and on their homeland. In some ways, these are postcolonial films as they reflect a reality where the Québécois have become masters in their own province. At the same time, globalization has meant a loss of Québécois identity for many of its upwardly mobile thirty-something population. Turpin's film has been labeled the first Generation X Québécois film (Mandolini 32). Andre Lavoie's review of the film is entitled "Je me souviens (de rien)" (8). For, in Quebec, the license plates proclaim proudly, "Je me souviens," as a claim to a national history and culture. Those who have forgotten seem to be the new generation who, with the freedom of the world at their command, find it difficult to care much about a Québécois identity that they take for granted. There are surely multiple reasons for this new self-confidence, but the start of this transition is usually seen to be Bill 101. This was a law passed by the Quebec government in 1977 that privileged French as the language of Quebec, and secured political and economic ascendancy for the French-speaking population of the province. Paradoxically this has meant an eventual retreat of the Quebec nationalist cause since the problems that fuelled this cause have mostly been eliminated, at least for the upwardly mobile French-speaking middle-class (MacMillan 117). The film speaks of the new generation that has grown-up in this era. This wandering thirty-something generation is afraid of commitment, and always fleeing. The love of wide-open spaces, the attraction of the void, the desire to lose oneself find their culmination in Alex, the film's protagonist. In an interview, Turpin himself states that *Un crabe* is really a critique of the Québécois male of his generation (4).

Un crabe dans la tête, which literally translates as "a crab in the head", starts with images of a deep-sea diver swimming around in what we are told is the Indian Ocean. He is taking photos of a shipwreck but, as he emerges from the boat, he seems to fall into a deeper, darker hole in the ocean floor.

When he wakes he is told that he has had a diving accident and is suffering a certain amount of memory loss as a result. Due to his agent's manipulations, he goes back to Montreal which seems to be the last place he wants to go to. Alex is a photographer who specializes in underwater photography and his agent has decided that he should be at the opening of his new show. The agent promises him that the photos he has sent back from the Indian Ocean will make him a "star". However, Alex does not remember what these photos are about, and it will only be at the climax of the film that the viewer will finally see them. Since these images are the central mystery of the film, they are important in terms of its construction of meaning. They turn out to be photos of a dead child floating in the ocean.

Alex refuses at first to stay in Montreal but he meets Marie at his friend Sam's flat and is so smitten that he decides to stay. Marie is a cultural critic for a television station and they watch a film that she has to review. Alex tries so hard to please her that he changes his mind several times as to the film's worth. He also lies to her about his plans, and when she finds his plane ticket she's none too pleased so he tears up the ticket. She leaves at this point and an image of a small crab walking around inside a brain appears accompanied by the sound of an incomprehensible language. This image is important as well since it will reoccur throughout the film.

The next morning, Alex finds Sarah, Sam's girlfriend who is deaf, in the apartment. They communicate through a computer and he tells her that silence fascinates him, but she answers that silence is a concept that is inaccessible to the deaf. Sarah is a journalist who works with Marie and she becomes a central figure in the film in that communication with her usually occurs through a third person who translates her sign language, or a telephone/computer operator who types in questions and answers. As with the photographs a "hidden reality" is communicated / revealed through a technological apparatus. This thematic line is extended through the figure of Sarah's boyfriend whose work at an observatory allows him use of a telescope that explicitly shows what is otherwise hidden to the naked eye.

Alex tries to be honest with Marie and manages to ingratiate himself into her affections to some extent. But she is a modern, independent woman whose honesty and straightforwardness contrasts sharply with his necessity to please at all costs. It is this necessity which gets him into trouble in the next episode of the film where he goes to see Audrey, a dope dealer who lives in a penthouse with a view of Montreal and its freeways. Paradoxically, Audrey is agoraphobic and she asks Alex to substitute for her unreliable, angry, English punk courier. Alex agrees and takes a delivery to one of her clients, Armando, who happens to be a young Québécois businessman living in the latest technological wonder of a house besides the river. It talks in a disembodied voice to its owner and even takes note of his latest stock-market decisions. I can only surmise that he is a caricature of the nouveau riche Québécois of this generation. He takes Alex on a speed boat ride that is filmed much like an ad, with fast cuts, moving camera and music on the sound track, to underline the consumerist lifestyle so espoused by this new bourgeoisie.

Alex, Marie, Sam and Sarah go up to a lakeside cabin to relax. When Alex jumps in the lake, he doesn't come back up and has to be rescued by his friend. Later he tells Sarah, through the computer interpreter, that he lost his memory in the Indian Ocean. He was fascinated by the depths and he let himself sink. When he touched bottom, the battery in his flashlight gave out and he was completely in the dark. Sarah asks him if he was scared but he answers that he felt great. The next scene shows Alex and Sarah deep-sea diving in a swimming pool, the screen goes dark and then the lights come back on. The two bodies form a pattern which is similar to that of the crab that reappears throughout the film. This love of silence and darkness seems to be associated with his memory loss and with a need to forget the past, especially his life in Montreal.

Part of the reason for his dislike of Montreal is revealed in the party scene when he and Marie go to deliver some dope. These people are old friends and his wife appears to taunt him and to warn Marie that he is unreliable. He admits that he left for Asia and never saw, or called, his wife again. But he does seem to have a good side and he keeps on taking care of Audrey, the dope dealer. Realizing she's agoraphobic he takes her out for a ride in car and boat, and reintroduces her to the joys of the outside world. Like Alex, Audrey is in danger of staying trapped in a vacuum of silence and forgetfulness. The blue sky that surrounds her penthouse is very like the blue ocean of Alex's dive. For Alex, diving seems to be a sort of drugged-out experience that disconnects him from the real world.

But Alex is not the only one who is disconnected by too much freedom. His friend Sam is offered an opportunity to spend some time in an observatory in Chile and he can't turn the opportunity down, even if it means separation from Sarah. Alex tries to comfort Sarah and takes her to the gallery where his photos have been hung for exhibition. When he realizes that they are photos of a dead child, he finally remembers them and he becomes upset. Sarah comforts him and they make love. Now he has betrayed his best friend as well.

Alex is not too happy about showing these photos especially as there has been an incident at the gallery where the photos were vandalized and labeled indecent. But his agent reassures him that it was just a publicity stunt and that the photos will make him a "star." At the opening of Gallery Imag, Marie is present as a reporter and Alex shows up even though he has insisted on the photos being shown anonymously. A woman freaks out at these photos of a dead child and Alex admits to Marie that the photos are his. He tells her that he discovered the corpse by chance and that he should have brought it to the surface but he found it peaceful. At this point, there is an insert of the crab in the head and the sound of a weird language is again heard. Marie's official comment is that the photos are either an easy provocation or an authentic work of art. This decision is left up to the viewer by the film. But Alex is at last ready to admit that these images are his, and to admit to his friend that he slept with Sarah. Perhaps this has a salutary effect since in the last scene of the film, we see him standing in his diving suit over a hole in the ice. Something seems to bother him and he pulls off his head covering and finds a crab inside which he drops into the water. The last shot

is of him shaking his head as he has done numerous times before to a tune we hear on the soundtrack - "Bella Ciao."

Obviously, one of the central images in the construction of the film's meaning is that of the crab in the head. It seems to signify a certain mental disturbance. When the insert of the little crab walking around a brain appears, we also hear a strange, incomprehensible language. This links the image to a sense of dislocation such as one feels when exposed to a language and culture that is not one's own. And, of course, the crab seems to enter the protagonist's head when he's deep-sea diving in the Indian Ocean, which is as far from Quebec as one could get. However, following the images of deep-sea diving comes an image seldom associated with the exotic. This is the image of Alex in a decompression chamber being watched over by an Indian doctor. She tells him in English that he has had a diving accident and is suffering from memory loss, and the information on his computer informs him that he went down too deep.

These introductory scenes already set up many of the ideas associated with globalization. Generally the term applies to the notion of a global village which has come about through the apparent smallness of the world due to improved communications, and the way in which changes in one area are likely to affect the rest of the world. Thus Alex can contact his agent even from this remote location and can travel back from India to Montreal in a few days. The photographs that he has taken in the ocean's depths can be sent to his agent in Montreal at an even more rapid rate. What is also obvious is that Western scientific knowledge and technology is available in India, as well as Montreal, and that the language of international communication is English.

The vast and ever-expanding web of information resides at the center of recent debates on the politics of national identity and the culture of global technology. There are three prominent responses to this phenomena. Against the threat of global homogenization cultural nationalists seek to attain or retain the integrity and independence of national ways of life and language. In contrast, cosmopolitans advocate the creation of an information society linked by a sophisticated and relatively open communications infrastructure. These cosmopolitans represent the demands of a growing international middle class whose universal humanism is associated with ecological, social, economic, ethical and political concerns that are inexorably bound to an increasingly interdependent world. In opposition to this, postmodernists see hegemony of power inherent in the language of interdependence and universal humanism. They align themselves with cultural nationalists in their regard for cultural specificity and situated conditions. But, they go beyond those culturalists who find the locus of identity in the nation. For ultimately, this too, like universalism, is a belief in grand narratives and for postmodernists the identities of humans and cultures are irreducibly multiple. For them, at best, information technology provides a forum of simulation for the multidimensional play of human identity. At its worst, it becomes a global panopticon of surveillance and control (Brint 4).

Where does the film stand in all of this? Certainly, the main protagonist, Alex undergoes a shocking experience in the Indian Ocean which

brings about a memory loss. He can't remember what happened in the depths, or even what photos he took there and sent to Montreal. This kind of shock to the system can be associated with the effects of globalization. Peter L. Berger, in his article on the cultural dynamics of globalization, calls it a cultural earthquake which affects virtually every part of the world but it affects different people in different ways (9). The "earthquake" seems to have affected Alex profoundly as even before his accident he had been acting somewhat strangely. And, if Turpin meant this character to be a portrait of the Québécois male of his generation, that portrait is of a very disturbed man.

Aside from wanting to please and seduce every woman he meets, he also seems to have a phobia about returning to Montreal, his hometown. In other words, he treasures the freedom of movement and casual encounters that the international lifestyle he has adopted affords him. Berger states that the one theme that different sectors of cultural globalization, both elite and popular, have in common is that of individuation. All sectors of the emerging global culture enhance the independence of the individual over against tradition, and collectivity. This can be experienced as a "liberation", but it may also be experienced as a great burden (8). For Alex, both effects seem to apply, for his guilt over leaving his wife is apparent from the first when he gets to Montreal but cannot stay in their apartment. His relationship with his new love, Marie, is also troubled by his lack of honesty and commitment; because of this, Marie cannot trust or love him. We are never sure how much he loves her as he even betrays his best friend by sleeping with Sarah. Even in the case of the photos he has taken, he cannot openly acknowledge them as his until the end of the film. The effects of globalization certainly seem to have disturbed his equilibrium. However, in some ways, this figure of movement and freedom has always been present within Québécois cultural tradition.

If one looks at Louis Hemon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1916), the archetypal Québécois novel, the figure of the "coureur de bois" (the wanderer in the forest or fur trapper) is quite similar to that of Alex. In the novel, Maria loves François Paradis who has sold his father's farm and works in the lumber camps, and as a trapper, and guide, and trader with the Indians in northern Quebec. But the foolhardy youth dies in a snowstorm on the way to see his beloved. Ben-Z Shek states that Hemon could not keep François as a potential agent of disequilibrium alive, and at the same time conclude the novel in a conformist manner. For the sentimental choices of Maria are also ideological ones. She also rejects Lorenzo Surprenant who entices her with the pleasant life she will have if she marries him and moves to the USA. In the end, she marries the stolid farmer next door. She has heard spiritual voices evoking the miracle of the land, the French heritage and the abiding qualities of the French-Canadian people and their fidelity to their heritage; in the land of Quebec nothing must die, and nothing must change (18).

The necessity to keep a French minority language and culture alive in North America has been a constant battle for French Canadians. In a way of course, the loss of the French heritage was a threat from the moment the colonists came to New France. Perhaps that is why it is important. Shek declares that there is here, what Hemon called, in *Maria Chapdelaine*, the eternal misunderstanding between the pioneers and the sedentary folk,

between the wanderers and the farmers (22). The struggle to keep a traditional culture alive becomes that much greater in the age of globalization.

Berger claims that there can be no doubt that the economic and technological transformations that drive the phenomenon of globalization have created large social and political problems such as the bifurcation between winners and losers, and the challenge to traditional notions of national sovereignty. If for some globalization implies the promise of an international civil society conducive to peace and democratization, for others it implies the threat of an American economic and political hegemony, with its cultural consequences being a homogenized world resembling Disneyland (2).

The threat of American capitalism to Québécois values is already present in *Maria Chapdelaine* in the figure of Lorenzo Surprenant who entices her with an easy life in America. In the film, the figure of Armando has a similar function as he is the Québécois businessman totally entranced with all the comforts and conveniences of a technologically enhanced home. As Berger explains, the emerging global culture is indeed American in origin and content. Language is a crucial factor in this cultural diffusion and of course the international language of business and technology is English (2). This is made obvious at the start of the film when both Alex and the Indian doctor speak English, and throughout the characters easily switch from French to English. Of course, for the Québécois this has double implications since the English conquered them. But things have changed in Quebec and the only remnant of the English bully figure in the film is the Punk who runs errands for Audrey and cheats on her, and who Alex gives change to, and who he finally lashes out at for his surliness. In other words, the English within Quebec are not much of a threat anymore. As Katherine Monk points out, there has been a transition in Québécois films from a focus on external demons to a focus on internal ones (165).

Armando seems rather deranged and the technospace of his house by the river is a weird transformation of the domicile. According to Berger, every language carries with it a cultural freight of cognitive, normative and even emotional connotations. As does the American language, even apart from the beliefs and values propagated through the American mass media (3). Perhaps this is why Alex's and Armando's ride in the speedboat is filmed like an advertisement. The house itself is the ultimate consumer gadget. It is a disorienting space, which lacks a rational plan, and where the sounds of disembodied technical voices and doors that shut by themselves create a sense of postmodern dislocation reminiscent of Frederic Jameson's description of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. For him, this postmodern hyperspace can itself stand as the symbol for the incapacity of our minds to map the global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught (44).

Cultural globalization is a turbulent affair which is hard to control but some governments, including the government of Quebec, do try to accomplish "managed globalization" (Berger 15). Ivan Bernier states, in a report on this matter for the Quebec government, that the driving forces of international development, such as globalization and mass communication,

offer the opportunity to greatly expand inter-cultural exchange and understanding but also expand the threat of the leveling of cultural differences and the destruction of cultural assets. In general, the Quebec and Canadian governments do support the cultural domain (12). The fundamental argument in favour of the acknowledgement of the specificity of cultural products is supported by a vision of culture which takes into consideration the development of individuals and societies, of goods that communicate values, tastes and meanings which are necessary for the democratic functioning of any collectivity. Quebec does import more cultural products than it exports but there is also the argument that a country with a small market needs to export to be profitable. This argument reappears more and more frequently in the domain of the "image" industries and in particular in the multimedia sector (23). On the other hand, globalization is feared because of its dehumanizing aspects, its inability to take into consideration environmental concerns, and the loss of collective identity that it engenders (31).

If the figure of Armando is a warning of the loss of identity brought about by globalization, the figure of the dope dealer Audrey seems more problematic. She is a purveyor of drugs which could be seen as pointing to the stupefying effects of globalization. However, she also evinces marked agoraphobic tendencies which could point to the dangers of not being able to deal with the outside world. This character seems emblematic of the dilemma that Bernier discusses wherein globalization can both "dope us," and expand our knowledge of the world. According to Brint, as I stated earlier, postmodernists see globalization itself as full of contradictions as it can offer both prison like conditions and playful freedom, at least in terms of mental states (3).

I think that the film, like other postmodern texts forwards contradictions without resolving them. For instance, Alex's dilemma seems to have no resolution since his freedom leads to irresponsibility, but staying with a wife one does not love is a kind of imprisonment. At the end of the film he gets the crab out of his head and then plunges into the cold Quebec waters through a hole in the ice. Perhaps one has to live in Quebec to know how cold winter is here, but it is home. It is these kinds of paradoxes that structure postmodern / poststructuralist works. According to Scott Bukatman, Einstein stopped short of embracing thorough relativism. In the world of quantum physics, however, which is the world of postmodernism, the observer fundamentally determines the events, and the universe is cast as a field of possibilities devoid of absolute causation. Our perception of reality consequently appears contradictory, dualistic, and paradoxical (173).

It is sometimes forgotten that Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* was, in fact, commissioned as a report on knowledge by the government of Quebec (xxv). As Bill Marshall points out, this suggests that Quebec is not only very much in the flows of postmodernity but also has the resources to carve out a distinct space within them. Quebec, according to Marshall is about the duality of the co-existence of a national project and the long-held knowledge of its aspirant and incomplete nature. Furthermore, Quebec's dilemmas have been intensified by the effects of globalization on its citizens, who have become inscribed within a public and media space the frontiers of which do not coincide with the national territory.

Marshall cites the example of Daniel Langlois's multimedia company Softimage, which provided animation software for *Jurassic Park* (Stephen Spielberg, 1993) and which has also sponsored the new cinema complex on Boulevard Saint-Laurent dedicated to experimental and auteur cinema (288).

This type of contradiction underlies the film's depiction of the art gallery where Alex has his photo show which is called Imag. His agent not only sets up the show but also sets up a fake vandalism stunt for the sake of publicity. Alex's specialty is underwater images from exotic locations like the Indian Ocean or South America. We are never told what uses these images are put to when they're sold but presumably they are used in ads and can be seen as part of the First World's exploitation of the Third World and of natural resources. This brings us back to the mystery of the photos of the dead child floating in the Indian Ocean that make up Alex's exhibit. One woman in the audience has hysterics because she finds them terrifying. Alex himself finds them peaceful. What are they about? There does not seem one "truth" inherent in them either.

The questioning of "so-called truths" is inherent in postmodernist / poststructuralist thought. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard called for an abandonment of those "truths" or "metanarratives" that have guided western thinking, such as the Enlightenment notion of human liberation or the Marxist totalizing account of history. "Simplifying to the extreme," writes Lyotard, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). In postmodern works, the epistemological doubt and ambiguity of modernism gets pushed further towards an acceptance of contradictions and paradoxes for Lyotard it is "the inventor's paralogy" (xxv). Lyotard's book examined the impact of computers on society so it seems particularly applicable to a discussion of globalization. He concludes that,

computers could become the "dream" instrument for controlling and regulating the market system, extended to include knowledge itself and governed exclusively by the performativity principle. In that case, it would inevitably involve the use of terror. But it could also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions.
(67)

We thus come back to the dichotomy between prison and freedom. But for Lyotard this dichotomy can be overcome by giving the public free access to the memory and databanks. Because language games are non-finite discussion would never risk fixating. For him, this "sketches the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown" (67).

Perhaps it is this very tension that is given embodiment in the image of the dead child floating. Images of dead children are quite common in Québécois films. One has only to think of dead child in the coffin in *Mon Oncle Antoine* (Claude Jutra, 1971). Often, especially in Third World films, the child is a symbol of the future of the nation. A dead child is thus not a happy prospect but Alex finds the image peaceful. He also tells Sarah that silence fascinates him and that the dark depths attract him. His deep sea

accident is associated with a loss of memory which seems to point to a loss of collective memory and identity. Yet, the dead child is floating in the ocean and water has always been associated with rebirth. So, perhaps what the image means is that the old world has to die for the new one to be born. After all the theme song of the film is "Bella Ciao."

Other contemporary Quebecois filmmakers have also questioned the enclosure of Quebec nationalism. Erin Manning discusses Robert Lepage's film *Le Confessionnal* (1995) and how it creates a discourse that speaks of the nation not as a stable identity but as a place whose bounds are always subject to redefinition (49). But this, I would suggest, is giving too cheerful and one dimensional an interpretation of the image of the dead child. For it is also horrific as Alex himself acknowledges. He should have pulled it out of the sea. The child could have been the victim of a murder. And it is this victimization of children of the Third World that the image also evokes. For some of the victims of globalization are Third World children who are made to work in abominable conditions. One of the contradictions that the film points to is that when the victims of capitalism are victims no longer, they become part of a world that victimizes others. Our desire for freedom thus often clashes with our desire for justice.

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