

Introduction  
Science of the Spirit: Québec Cinema in the Age  
of Technological Reproduction

Erin Manning



*La Neuvaine* (réal. Bernard Émond, 2005) © K-Films Amérique

*God's name would suit everything that may not be broached, approached, or designated, except in an indirect and negative manner. Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God, the distinction between God and God's name opening up the very space of this enigma (Derrida 1992: 76).*

What would it mean to view Québec Cinema – and especially those films that emerge post-referendums – as the apotheosis of the unsaid? What would it imply to situate Québec cinema at the intersection of the scientific and the spiritual, where God – the God of the Catholic Church – continues to rear its unspoken head? Where would we situate, today, religion and the technological, spirituality and the scientific as regards Québec cinema and the culture that surrounds it? To what extent have images of the Church continued to infiltrate a cinema that calls itself secular? Is it possible to make a clear break between the secular and the religious in cultural discourse, particularly a cultural discourse whose « identity premises » – be they pre- or post- Quiet Revolution – are firmly ensconced in either the adherence to or the rejection of God and his institutions? These are a few of the questions this journal issue addresses.

Within the discourse of negative theology, God embodies the absence around which belief, knowledge and experience continue to be revealed. God has not disappeared – he has reappeared in his absence: « 'God' 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language. But the trace of this negative operation is inscribed in and on and as the event (what comes, what there is and which is always singular, what finds in this kenosis the most decisive condition of its coming or its upsurging) » (Derrida 1992: 300). The « without » that silently carries the name of God is reinscribed in the writing of the institution, political, technoscientific, cultural. Even the law, even democracy are enmeshed within these aporias of negative theology.

To make a clean break from God is not an easy matter. Indeed, all matter seems to be possessed – negatively or creatively – with the intensity of his absence-presence. Secularism no longer guarantees God's absence. Of course, this is a narrative of a certain reading of the West, of a certain positioning of our ourselves as emerging from a certain kind of institutional structuring, a certain kind of modernity and technological revolution. Yet Québec cinema is indebted to this tradition. Even beyond its own particular history of Church-sanctioned discourses (see Martin Picard's paper), it already holds a place within the writing of Catholicism as Catholicism emerges from a discourse of colonization that has been a privileged form of institutional politics of the past 500 years.

To suggest that we cannot completely divest ourselves of the Church is not to suggest that the Church is the single form of control over our cultural enunciations. Nor is it to suggest that the Church plays an active role in the writing of these religio-cultural tropes. It is, rather, to suggest that to believe that we have escaped a certain kind of

institutional organization (that we would here call religion) is to maintain a superficial approach to the formations of culture here in Québec. As Derrida writes, « even to suspend for an instant one's religious affiliation, has this not been the very resource, since time immemorial, of the most authentic faith or of the most originary sacredness? » (1998: 23).

Once we become aware of the potential role the Church continues to play in our cultural discourses, we are perhaps more capable of dealing with the nuances of cultural appropriation and politico-cultural change. For politics has certainly been the core element in the promotion of secularism in Québec, where politics is firmly placed in opposition to the Church. In fact, we could perhaps even say that all of post-Quiet Revolution Québec Cinema (at least until the mid 1990s) has been explicitly concerned with creating deviant politics that challenge the structures of religion (see Ian Lockerbie's paper). I am not saying that Québec cinema has failed in this endeavour. This preoccupation with politics is certainly one of its most enduring factors. What I am proposing instead is that perhaps what has made this cinema so fascinating and complex is that the secular and the sacred have always remained intertwined – despite all of our best efforts to conceive of a project that would separate them, once and for all – and that it is this interweaving of two institutions that has made the political project so challenging.

Derrida writes:

*To determine a way or religion as such, one would have to be certain that one can delimit the religious. One would have to be certain that one can distinguish all the predicates of the religious [...]. One would have to dissociate the essential traits of the religious as of the juridical, of the political, or of the economic. And yet, nothing is more problematic than such a dissociation. The fundamental concepts that often permit us to oscillate or to pretend to isolate the political – restricting ourselves to this particular circumscription – remain religious or in any case theologico-political (1998: 25).*

To engage Québec cinema as a cultural artifact imprinted with the legacy of the Catholic Church is to allow ourselves to begin asking questions as much to the Church as to structures of the political. To what extent, for example, are all political structures (of a certain understanding of « the West ») similarly imprinted by the kind of faith upheld by the Catholic Church? Québec is but a small example of this [1]. « Religion circulates in the world, one might say, like an English word that has been to Rome and taken a detour to the United

States. Well beyond its strictly capitalist or politico-military figures, a hyper-imperialist appropriation has been underway now for centuries » (Derrida 29: 1998). International law and global political rhetoric solicits a concept of faith that has been institutionalized within the terms of humanitarian aid or military intervention, but that have, actually, never been capable of escaping the hierarchical structures of domination apparent within the rhetoric of the Catholic Church (and perhaps even more insistently of what is now being called the « religious right »). « Wherever this apparatus dominates, it articulates itself through a discourse on religion. From here on, the word 'religion' is calmly (and violently) applied to things which have always been and remain foreign to what this word names and arrests in its history » (Derrida 1998: 29).

Everyday concepts such as knowledge, belief, faith, freedom continue to be inflected with a certain inescapable narrative: « The temptation to believe in knowledge [...] can hardly be separated from a certain fear and trembling » (1998: 31). This is not to suggest that religion is just one thing. Religion morphs as often and as easily as do politics and culture. Institutions are mobile machines despite their apparent stability and solidity. This is perhaps where those of us who would like to believe that a counterrevolution is possible situate ourselves: culture can affect politics! But we must be careful, because this is also where a new discourse begins to take hold: culture and the technological revolution are not immune from a certain religiosity (see Erin Manning's paper). As Derrida writes: « The said 'return of the religious', which is to say the spread of a complex and overdetermined phenomenon, is not a simple return, for its globality and its figures (tele-techno-media-scientific, capitalistic and politico-economic) remain original and unprecedented » (1998: 42).

New auras come with the technological revolution. Benjamin is never far from our thoughts (he knew how hard it was to refigure politics). To suggest that technology is immune to religious discourse is to posit science as the immutable other. This has never been the case: all faith discourses are just that. Logics that posit immunity will always in some sense marry Science and Religion. The technological and its diverse auras is not neutral. It is inflected by the politico-cultural discourses that make it viable. Cinema can be a religious machine as much as it can be a political machine (see Patrick Bossé's paper).

This volume does not propose an answer to this complex intertwining of the religious and the techno-scientific. In some aspects, it simply states the conundrum, hoping for an engagement that might allow us to begin to theorize a kind of politics that would not continue to be dependent on institutional structures of hierarchy and domination. In other aspects, it proposes ways in which Québec cinema finds

alternatives to this prescribed approach, opening vistas of image-making practices that propose a new kind of cultural politics.

In this regard Etienne Beaulieu's paper is particularly thought-provoking. Through a close analysis of the films of Denys Arcand, Beaulieu notes a passage in Arcand's work from what Deleuze identifies as the movement-image to a time-image. An unspoken « perhaps » in Beaulieu's paper might be that the time-image proposes one way in which a politics-without-content might be conceived. A politics without content is not an empty politics. Rather, it is a politics created by the event, a politics that cannot yet define itself because it is always in the process of becoming. In contrast to a movement-image where the content is mobile, a time-image reveals time rather than content. As Deleuze suggests, what is specific to the time-image is that it makes perceptible relationships of time which are not superceded by the represented object. Such time-images refute the linear model of past-present-future, calling forth a certain future-anterior, a concept of the to-come where the future is already visible in the present, and the past in the future.

Images that are plunged into time rather than crossing space not only alter linear time structures but also reinflect movement. Through these images we see movement not as something that crosses space, but that creates space-time. This means that the time-image carries within its potential a certain rewriting of time-space. To rewrite time-space is to rethink the politics of the event. What would be more central to the ongoing political project that is Québec? When politics no longer mirrors its institutional traditions, when politics becomes event-ful, suddenly we are capable of imagining a new project. This new politics would be neither secular nor religious: events cannot harbour institutions. It is only in the back-gridding of the event (in the categorizing of the event within a certain stable and recognizable structure) that institutions are built to house it.

*[Erin Manning is assistant professor in studio art and film studies at Concordia University (Montreal, Canada) as well as director of The Sense Lab, a laboratory that explores the intersections between art practice and philosophy through the matrix of the sensing body in movement. Publications include the forthcoming Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2006) and Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home and Identity in Canada (Minnesota University Press, 2003)].*

## Notes

[1] We need simply to look to the other side of the border at the discourse of the « axis of evil » to appreciate the ways in which politics and the Church have become irrevocably and dangerously intertwined within the current Bush administration.

## Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. « Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction » in *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Deleuze, Gilles. *The Movement-image*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Time-image*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989.

Derrida, Jacques. « How to Avoid Speaking: Denials » in *Derrida and Negative Theology*. Ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay. Albany: SUNY, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. « Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone » in *Religion*. Ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo. Stanford UP, 1998.