

## **Quebecus Horribilis: Theatricality, the «Moment of Horror» and Quebec's «Satanist» Cinema.**

By André Loiselle

**Synopsis:** In their book, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (2002), Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson argue that horror plays performed at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol from the late 19th century to the theatre's closure in the early 1960s generally oscillated in style between realism and melodrama. The former would prevail during most of the drama, as the "normal" narrative would unfold, until the "moment of horror" when the tone would switch drastically to melodramatic dread. This article argues that a similar shift operates in Quebec horror films, especially those films that deal with Satanism. At "moments of horror," these films replicate the theatricality of stylized melodrama, breaking with the realism of secure normality. The shift from realism to theatricality is all the more unsettling in French Canadian horror films that Quebec cinema has traditionally tended towards realism and has generally avoided the "fantastique". This break from the realist tradition of Quebec cinema parallels the films' break from French Canada's religious tradition, as moments of horror coincide with moments of blasphemy. Looking at three Quebec "Satanist" films from the past thirty-five years (*Le Diable est parmi nous*, *The Pyx*, and *Sur le seuil*), the author identifies elements of montage and mise-en-scène that represent instances of cinematic theatricality, where the set, the cinematography, the editing, the actor's gestures and speech, through theatrical artifice, stand out as aberrations within the realistic, Catholic milieu depicted on screen.

The Quebec film industry has produced only a handful of feature films that can be accurately labelled «horror movies»; little more than half a dozen, if one excludes parodies like *Karmina* 1 and 2 (1996, 2001, Gabriel Pelletier) and «branch plant» productions like *Honeymoon* (1985, Patrick Jamain) in which Montreal masquerades as New York City.<sup>1</sup> This is hardly surprising, though, since Quebec cinema has always displayed a strong tendency towards realism and an equal disregard for the «fantastique» (Véronneau, 109). Another particularity of this small corpus is that, in almost half of these films, horror is directly associated with religion. Again, this is not surprising since a culture that has been dominated by the Catholic Church for most of its history is bound to be haunted by nightmarish images of priests gone mad, devoted parishioners worshipping inverted crosses and church gatherings turning into orgiastic bloodbaths.

My interest in what I loosely refer to as Quebec's «Satanist» cinema lies in its intriguing opposition to, or reversal of, the norms of Quebec cinema and culture. The dominant traditions of realism and Catholicism are interrupted and reversed in the «Satanist» film. If one agrees with the basic formula for the horror film proposed by Robin Wood in his seminal introduction to *The American Nightmare* (1979), namely, that «normality is threatened by the Monster» (Wood, p.14), then in the Quebec Satanist film, normality is realism and Catholicism, and the threat is theatricality and devil worship. The locus of horror in Quebec, the defining location of *Quebecus horribilis* in cinema, is thus the theatrical space of the black mass.

I am not proposing here that this is unique to Quebec. In fact, it could be argued that theatricality is

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<sup>1</sup> I define «Quebec horror movies» as those films 1) that are set in Quebec and 2) whose main purpose is to scare, disturb or shock their audiences. According to this definition, only the following are included: *Playgirl Killer* (1968, Erick Santamaria); *Le Diable est parmi nous* (1972, Jean Beaudin); *The Pyx* (1973, Harvey Hart); *Shivers* (1975, David Cronenberg); *Rabid* (1977, Cronenberg); *Sur le seuil* (2003, Éric Tessier); *La Peau blanche* (2004, Daniel Roby); and *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damnés* (2005, Robin Aubert). While there have been only a handful of Quebec horror feature films, the last decade has seen the emergence of a large number of shorts that belong to the genre, most notably the films of Izabel Grondin and some of the shorts collected in the Spasm series.

present in all horror films. If, as Noël Carroll writes early in his *Philosophy of Horror* (1990), «horror novels, stories, films, plays and so on are marked by the presence of monsters» (Carroll, 15), then theatricality as a correlative of the monster becomes an essential part of the genre. The monster may be interpreted in a wide range of ways. It could productively be read as the abject mother who threatens patriarchy (Creed), as the racial other who confronts Whiteness (Pinedo), as the «Nemesis» who comes to impose strict morality upon a promiscuous community (Jones), or as an entity that challenges reason and causes cognitive dissonance (Grodal). But whatever its nature, whether it is an alien from outer space, a chainsaw-wielding maniac, a man-made creature, a ghostly apparition, a pack of zombies, a seductive vampire or devil worshippers, the «monster» is always theatrical. The monster's very name, derived from the Latin *monstrare*, connotes the state of being put on display. By definition, the monster is theatrical, for it must be perceived as a menacing spectacle in order to achieve its terrifying impact. It does not come as a surprise that the typical horror-film device of first hiding the monster to build up anticipation and then revealing it in all its horrific glory finds its origins in medieval morality plays like *Mankind* (c. 1470). In *Mankind*, the appearance of the devil Titivillus, who scorns moderation and common sense, marks the climactic point of the show, as spectators are solicited for donations before they can enjoy the excessive display of evil (Bevington 1975, 901, 920). Monstrosity and theatrical exhibitionism, it could be argued, go hand in hand.

But while theatricality might be omnipresent in the horror film, the Quebec corpus seems especially representative of the theatrical tendencies of the genre, for it stands as a rare exception to the realist tradition that has dominated production in the province; this contrast between «normal» realism and horrific theatricality is thus potentially more striking and disturbing here than in other national cinemas. The three films I will examine, *Le Diable est parmi nous* (1972, Jean Beaudin), *The Pyx* (1973, Harvey Hart) and *Sur le seuil* (2003, Éric Tessier), construct «normality» very much within the realist style of Quebec cinema, but then break radically with this tradition at moments of horror when theatricality becomes the dominant mode.

In their book, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (2002), Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson argue

that horror plays performed at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the theatre's closure in the early 1960s generally oscillated in style between naturalism and melodrama. The former would prevail during most of the drama, as the «normal» narrative would unfold, until the «moment of horror» when the tone would switch drastically to melodramatic dread. «It is at these moments that any pretence of naturalism is finally abandoned and the full force of stylized melodrama is brought to bear on the performance,» say Hand and Wilson. The moment of horror represents, through stylistic shift, «a journey which leads from bourgeois security to mortal danger, from the rational to the insane, from – in effect – Naturalism to Melodrama» (Hand and Wilson, 37-38). I would argue first that a similar shift operates in the horror film. At «moments of horror,» the horror film replicates the theatricality of stylized melodrama, breaking with the naturalism or realism of secure normality. This shift from realism to theatricality is even more forceful and disturbing in *Le Diable est parmi nous*, *The Pyx* and *Sur le Seuil* as a result of this cinema's propensity for realism.

Before looking at these films in detail, however, I should define what I understand by theatricality. Patrice Pavis's definition from his *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (1998) offers a useful starting point: «Theatricality is that which is specifically theatrical, in performance or in the dramatic text [...where] theatrical means the specific form of theatre enunciation, the movement of the words, the dual nature of the enunciator (character/actor) and his utterances [...and] the artificiality of performance (representation)» (Pavis 1998, 395-397). This summary of theatricality contains two essential points: first, its reference to words enunciated in the movement of the actor as character and, second, the *artificiality* of the performance. While the former (words spoken by actors) is one of the fundamental similarities between theatre and narrative film that differentiate them from other forms like the novel, the latter (the artificiality of representation) seems to be one of the main contrasts between stage and screen performances. But as will be discussed presently, the issue of artificiality is central to my understanding of theatricality in the horror film. As such, my use of the term theatricality differs from the connotations that scholars like Elizabeth Burns (Burns 1972) and Richard Schechner (Schechner

1977) give to the word, relating it to notions of ritual in everyday life where artifice is not necessarily foregrounded. Rather, I understand theatricality as a mode of representation that stresses artificiality over realism.

This definition of theatricality must be further refined by introducing Timothy Corrigan's notion of «cinematic theatricality» (Corrigan 1999, 62-66). This concept serves to acknowledge that while some cinematic practices *recall* theatrical modes of expression, theatricality on film is never identical to theatricality on stage because of the live presence of the actor in the theatre. When I refer to theatricality in the horror film I thus imply «cinematic theatricality,» which suggests that cinema recalls the artifice of theatrical performance without reproducing its live character. The horror film, I contend, is an instance of «cinematic theatricality» when, in moments of horror, the actor's gestures and speech, through their artificiality, their *difference* from what is considered realistic acting, creates an intense affect in the audience. The setting where the «moment of horror » occurs also partakes of cinematic theatricality since the *locus horribilis*, the place of horror, often differs markedly from other settings in the film.

As Michèle Garneau suggests in her article «Effets de théâtralité dans la modernité cinématographique,» theatricality emerges at moments when cinematographic realism is interrupted by the artifice of fiction. Therefore, a film that would be completely «artificial» in its *mise en scène* and acting would have fewer «effets de théâtralité,» if any, than a film that has a realistic, or even documentary style throughout, except at certain moments where the artifice enters in dialectic conflict with reality (Garneau, 30). Garneau links this idea to the beginnings of modern Quebec cinema, when «cinéma direct» became the preferred style of cineastes making fiction films; ***Le Chat dans le sac*** (Gilles Groulx, 1964) being the prototype of this practice (Garneau, 29). In ***Le Chat dans le sac***, when the main character, Claude (Claude Godbout), interrupts the flow of documentary observations and addresses the camera directly, theatricality emerges: «Quoi de plus théâtral qu'un acteur interpellant directement le spectateur?» (Garneau, 34). Garneau also argues that cinematic theatricality materializes through the *gestus*, the Brechtian notion of a physical posture that crystallizes social relations. De-socialized and aesthetized by Deleuze, the *gestus* becomes

a visual and auditory posture that stands out as it amplifies the attitudes of everyday life. For Garneau, theatricalization through the Deleuzian *gestus* appears as much in the song and dance numbers of Lars Von Trier's ***Dancer in the Dark*** as in the idiosyncratic language of Pierre Perrault's characters (Garneau 37).

Garneau's commentaries on the *gestus* challenge the received wisdom about acting that associates film performances with realism and stage acting with artificiality. James Naremore, for instance, talks of «the "gestureless" form of classic cinema» (Naremore 1988, 4). But this rigid distinction between gestureless, realistic film acting and gesticulatory theatrical performance does not apply to every film, and certainly not to the excessive signifying modes of horror (the same point could be made about the theatricality of slapstick comedy and the musical). The main weapon in the horror film's machinery of terror is the monster's histrionics, which so successfully create fear in both the victim and the spectator. Naremore makes a point relevant to this issue when he writes, «presentational theatrics are possible in movies, but usually they are played for a fictional audience *inside* the film» (Naremore, 30). While he does not discuss the theatrics of the film monster, his observation offers some insight into the theatricality of horror, for monsters almost always perform their nefarious gestures to affect an audience before them, *inside* the film: the victim terrified by the villains' threatening physicality. The monster must put itself on display (*monstrare*) to successfully terrify.

While there is a wide range of monstrous *gestus*, the element that remains constant is the monster «acting out» its villainy, a practice that was already at work in the terrifying «blood and thunder» melodramas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Taylor, 122; Brooks, 19). This acting out is marked by *artificiality* defined as *difference* from the assumed realism of other characters. It is not that one specific gesture necessarily incarnates a satanic threat. Rather, what matters is the relationship of opposition that the threatening gesture holds vis-à-vis the performance of normality. Whatever technique the actor playing the monster might use, the purpose of the gestures is to set the monster apart from other characters, as *spectacle*, to create dissonance within the otherwise realistic milieu in which the drama unfolds. The *gestures* of the camera, the *gestures* of montage similarly function as instances of cinematic theatricality that

interrupt realist normality. Robin Wood's structural dichotomy between normality and the monster can thus be shifted from a psychoanalytic clash between the repressed Id and the domineering Super Ego, to an embodied antagonism incarnated in performance, *mise en scène* and montage. While normal characters are made to appear commonplace in keeping with cultural standards of realism, the monster is performed and filmed to stress its deviant behaviour through the interruption of realism. This is nowhere more obvious than in Quebec's first French language horror film, ***Le Diable est parmi nous***.

The film follows a journalist, Paul (Daniel Pilon), who investigates the mysterious death of a friend. His investigation eventually leads him to a Satanist sect. The first two thirds of the film generally adopt a realist style, shot on location. However, there are a few ruptures in the realist flow of the narrative that intimate that the outcome of Paul's investigation will undermine rational closure. (Incidentally, this is what differentiates the horror film from the crime mystery; while the latter tends to provide a rational elucidation of the mystery, the former generally frustrates the spectator's desire for cognitive mastery). For instance, an old lady (Rose-Rey Duzil) appears from time to time at especially suspicious moments. Both her peculiar, almost clownesque, demeanour and the comedic tune that accompanies her appearances operate as gesti that theatricalize the film, however briefly, and evoke a parallel space outside the realist narrative. Another even odder instance of theatricality transpires when Paul and his girlfriend Virginie (Danielle Ouimet) sing in Italian and act out a romantic scene while preparing breakfast. This utterly artificial and seemingly irrelevant moment seems out of place in what has been, so far, a realist thriller. However, it does serve the purpose of evoking the notion of performance, even more so than the vignettes featuring the little old lady. It suggests that Paul's relationship with Virginie is one marked by theatricality.

The theatricality of Paul and Virginie's morning performance fits Roland Barthes's definition of theatre, quoted by Garneau, as «le lieu d'une ultra-incarnation, où le corps est double, à la fois corps vivant venu d'une nature triviale, et corps emphatic, solonnel, glacé par sa fonction d'objet artificiel» (Garneau, 35; Barthes, 43). The stilted gestures of both lovers transform their courtship into an

artificial ritual. The relevance of this moment is in its connection to a later passage where the romantic wooing is turned on its head and becomes a disturbing, ceremonial rape. This is the «moment of horror,» when Paul finds himself in the middle of a black mass, where Virginie is welcomed into the sect by being violated by the Satanists. The solemnity with which the high priest performs the black mass harks back to the romantic courtship at the same time as it «elevates » it to the level of official, albeit heretic, ritual.

The enhanced theatricality of the black mass is not only the result of the more «solonnel» and «emphatic» performance of the priest in comparison to Paul and Virginie's pseudo-romantic performance in the kitchen. It is also the outcome of the different set and *mise en scène*. While Paul's and Virginie's comedic performance transpires in the realist environment of an apartment, the Satanist ceremony takes place in a large room of black, red and gold with esoteric signs on the walls and floor. A crowd observes the highly ritualized ceremony. The strangeness of the event arises from the theatricality of the space and the performance that displays (*monstrare*) the threat the sect represents for normality.

But the theatricality of the black mass, which interrupts the realism of the rest of the film, must itself be interrupted to maintain its effect of artificiality. As the solemn ceremony reaches its apex of incantation leading to the ritualized rape, the staginess of the satanic procedure becomes increasingly apparent. As the lengthy takes, affected gestures on the part of the high priest, pompous robes and fabricated decors succeed in generating threatening difference from the realist normality of the rest of the film, these techniques also run the risk of becoming normalized and losing their interruptive effect.

This is why, as the ritualized rape commences, at the moment when Virginie is taken, *possessed* by the priest and the devil for which he stands, Beaudin shifts modes again. But of course the style does not merely return to realism. Rather, the filmmaker introduces jarring montage to *re-theatricalize* the theatrical ceremony. The ceremonial is first interrupted by an orgiastic possession as frantic copulating bodies overwhelm the altar. The montage oscillates between group shots and close-ups on Virginie and various individuals involved in the collective copulation. There follows hallucinatory images of a «primitive » ballet featuring Black



dancers and quick superimpositions of bodies in movement. Shots of a satanic Jesus figure, who seems to be controlling the mass of possessed bodies engaged in the dance-orgy, are also inserted in the mix.

The black mass is then interrupted by a return to normality, as Paul and new girlfriend Hélène (Louise Marleau) walk away from the house of horror. But normality is fractured again by one final moment of horror. After Paul has inexplicably returned to his normal, realist life (was it just a horrible dream?), he enters his bedroom where he finds the little old lady lying on the bed. Beaudin replicates the same strategy as in the black mass. First, realism is interrupted by highly static cinematography and affected *mise –en –scène*, and then, this type of theatricality is itself interrupted by jarring montage. The stagy part of the scene shows an immobile Paul pondering the mysterious presence of the motionless woman lying on his bed. As the static shot is prolonged and becomes normalized, Beaudin again changes his approach and breaks into a succession of rapid shots of the old lady savagely stabbing Paul. Screams, laughter and heavy breathing are heard on the sound track as the images shift to negative when the sequence comes to an end. The film closes on a return to realism. Captions inform us on the number of unsolved disappearances in Montreal and elsewhere that could be blamed on Satanist sects, as the voice of the devil addresses the audience. The point of the ending is clearly to scare spectators into believing that Satanists lurk unseen in the city. Significantly, the purpose of the film was to make visible through theatricality a threat to normality that generally manages to hide itself.

It makes sense that the most striking instance of theatricality in *Le Diable est parmi nous* would be the moment of Virginie's possession (the English title of the film is in fact *Virginia's Possession* (Vatnsdal 65)), for the connection between possession and theatricality has often been noted (Almond, 41-42; Balme, 92-93; Leiris; Russell, 237). Jacques Bourgaux, in his *Possessions et simulacres, aux sources de la théâtralité* (1973), actually argues that possession represents the very origin of theatricality. Examining different traditions of possession, ranging from African tribes to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ursulines of Loudun and, of course, Ancient Greece and Dionysus, «*dieu possesseur par excellence,*» Bourgaux demonstrates how possession is

always accompanied by an element of simulation or theatricality (Bourgau, 56).

Les esprits, démons et dieux forment une galerie de personnages mythiques qui se manifestent, qui descendent sur terre, qui s'incarnent lors de chaque possession. Face aux possesseurs, deux attitudes fondamentales sont possibles: soit les chasser, ce sera l'*exorcisme*, soit les inviter à revenir périodiquement au cours de séances prévues à cet effet, ce sera l'*adorcisme*. La possession diabolique chrétienne est toujours un accident. Elle doit être exorcisée. (Bourgau, 12)

While the theatricality of «adorcisme,» to which I will return presently, is not surprising since the possession is initiated by a «spectacle offert aux dieux pour les inviter à descendre,» (Bourgau, 30) the theatricality of the Christian-based exorcism seems less evident since there should be no attempt in this practise to *perform*. If one believes in the Christian version of diabolical possession as an *accident*, then no one acts out monstrosity for the sake of attracting the possessor; and in the eventuality of a person being possessed, there is still no acting out since the person is no longer in control and not willfully performing gestures.

However, as Bourgau demonstrates, Christianity in both its Catholic and Protestant incarnations rests fundamentally on a rhetoric of authority and oppression. This implies that it is not enough to expel the demon. The exorcism must also convince the faithful of the risks and horrors of leaving oneself open to assaults from Satan. Scepticism on the part of Christians is an even greater evil than the devil himself. This is why exorcisms always contained an element of theatricality, where the casting out must also scare the audience into religious submission. «Très tôt les exorcistes se transforment en metteurs en scène. Ils ont un message à faire passer mais les exorcisées sont peu dociles et les réactions du public les surprennent parfois. Il faut que les prêtres redoublent de conviction, trouvent de nouveaux effets spectaculaires» (Bourgau, 46).

To a certain extent, the possession of Virginie plays a role similar to an exorcism insofar as the film itself uses theatricality to scare the spectator through a display of the excessively un-Christian behaviour of the Satanists. This is why Robin Wood sees William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*

(1973) as a reactionary film, because the film *itself* tries to function as an exorcism aimed at petrifying audiences into Christian compliance; that it fails in this enterprise does not diminish its conservatism. (Wood, 23). But there is no exorcism per se in ***Le Diable est parmi nous***. Rather, the ritual we witness is one of «adorcisme» explained by Bourgaux as follows: «Dans les cultes de possession l'initiation prélude à un retour périodique des possesseurs, elle signifie l'entrée dans une confrérie aux règles plus ou moins strictes suivant les religions, confrérie où la possession est une activité essentielle» (Bourgaux, 23). The black mass in ***Le Diable est parmi nous*** is explicitly performed to welcome Virginie into the sect and the performance of the ritual triggers the return of the possessor in the form of the aforementioned Jesus-looking devil.

The fact that the film can be read as both an exorcism, which seeks to frighten French Canadian spectators, and an adorcisme, which allows spectators to indulge in the fleshy pleasures of orgiastic Satanist worship without having to actually sell their souls to the devil, bears witness at once to the ambivalence of the horror film as a genre and the ambivalence of Quebecers as an audience. Horror films, even the most reactionary, always defeat their own conservative agendas by allowing the spectator to wallow in a spectacle of madness, sexual deviancy, blood and gore. Conversely, the early 1970s French Canadian spectator, no matter how liberated from the power of the Church after the Quiet Revolution, remained the product of a culture that was profoundly influenced by Catholicism. This might explain why within a year of the release of ***Le Diable est parmi nous***, another Quebec production came out with virtually the same topic of devil worship: ***The Pyx***.

While mainly an English-language film, ***The Pyx*** includes a number of dialogues in French and stars well-known Québec actors like Jean-Louis Roux, Jacques Godin and Donald Pilon (coincidentally, brother to Daniel Pilon who stars in ***Le Diable est parmi nous***). Furthermore, it focuses explicitly on Québec's Catholic culture, opening with an aerial shot of the cross on Mont Royal. The narrative follows detectives Jim Henderson (Christopher Plummer) and Pierre Paquette (Donald Pilon) who investigate the strange death of a prostitute, Elizabeth Lucy (Karen Black). Parallel to the present tense investigation, the film includes long flashbacks

showing the last few days in the life of Elizabeth. Shot entirely on location in Montreal, **The Pyx** espouses primarily a realist style. In fact, certain scenes unfolding in the streets and pubs of the city adopt a documentary look. Director Harvey Hart himself acknowledged the «documentary aspect» of the film (Vatnsdal 68).

The present-tense investigation remains within the realm of realist normality until the final scene, with virtually no spectacular or sensationalist effects. For instance, halfway through the film, when Henderson discovers the mutilated bodies of Meg (Yvette Brind'amour), the Madame for whom Elizabeth worked, as well as one of her colleagues, there is no screeching music or flash editing as would be expected in such a shocking scene. Rather, the sequence includes exclusively diegetic sounds and is made up only of handheld POV shots from Henderson's perspective and reaction shots as he walks through the house and sees the bloody bodies. This moment in the film deserves mention for it attests to a strong tendency in Quebec and Canadian cinema to contain within the parameters of empirical observation even gruesome events so that they avoid the cognitive dissonance of horror.

A thriller like Robert Morin's **Que dieu bénisse l'Amérique** (2005), for instance, manifests this refusal to extract from realist discourse potentially horrific material – a serial killer who ritualistically eliminates pedophiles – that could have been theatricalized and thus transformed into «moments of horror.» While the theme of twisted vigilante killers who painstakingly stage their retributive crimes (victims are fed meals and castrated) is not unlike what is found in **Saw** (2004, James Wan) and **Seven** (1995, David Fincher), the surreal horror of the crimes is never replicated cinematically through a similarly horrific staging of the scenes. Few scenes, through the use of eerie music, could have lent themselves to a horrific treatment, but Morin never crosses the line between realist suspense and theatrical terror. As is common in Quebec cinema, the only marked deviations from realism in **Que Dieu bénisse l'Amérique** are strictly for the sake of quirky humour.

**The Pyx** does break with realism to create moments of horror in its flashbacks. While most flashbacks showing us the «facts» about Elizabeth's life in the *demimonde* of prostitution tend to be realistic in style, there are noteworthy exceptions where the filmmaker interrupts normality with the

intention of disrupting the spectator's expectations. The stylized flashbacks present the spectators, beyond facts, with Elizabeth's romantic aspirations and nightmarish involvement with Satanists. The one romantic flashback is a heroin-induced dream/memory of soft-focused, slow motion horseback riding with a loving Prince Charming. While this flashback, as a positive counterpoint to the prostitute's difficult life, uses formalist techniques to elevate us above realism, as it were, other flashbacks seek to drag the audience deeper into a world of darkness and fear. Significantly, these are all associated with Catholicism or its mirror image, devil worship.

The first expressionistic flashback takes place in a convent where Elizabeth visits one of her friends, Sandra (Louise Rinfret), who is being treated for drug addiction. After a straightforward scene with Henderson and Paquette searching Meg's apartment, there is a jarring cut to the scene at the convent. Eerie music accompanies a sinuous camera movement showing religious statues from a low-angle position. As Elizabeth advances in a dark hallway, a sense of oppressive mystery arises, aided by the echoing «le corps du Christ » pronounced by a priest in the chapel where she eventually arrives. As the priest begins his service with «prions le seigneur,» an extreme low-angle shot shows Christ on the cross looking down at the camera. The shot is held long enough to convey a clear sense of the distortion and perversion of the church. The following few shots – an extreme high angle looking down on the service, a shot of Elizabeth «behind bars » looking in the chapel and a reverse shot of her looking at the service through bars – adds to the mood of subjugation that surrounds the chapel.

The subsequent sequence confirms this impression. As Elizabeth spends time with her friend in a small room, Sandra expresses her hatred for the nuns who constantly scrutinize her. The theatricality of the flashback – in its break with realism – culminates in Sandra's over-the-top, melodramatic explosion of madness. As Elizabeth tries to encourage her friend to get «back to normal,» Sandra responds: «I don't even know what that means.» She then bursts into insane screaming and gesticulating, which lead Elizabeth to run away from the convent in a panic, rushing down a corridor adorned with expressionistic triangular windows, whispering to herself «I'm sorry.» As the flashback concludes, the music comes to an abrupt end and the realist

style resumes, as the camera follows the cops in a hallway leading to the morgue where Elizabeth's body is stored. The purpose of the flashback is to introduce the notions of perverted religion, coercion and madness, all of which reappear in their fully-fledged form near the end of the film.

As the flashbacks unfold, we learn that Meg has arranged for Elizabeth to be used for a sacrifice conducted by Satanists lead by the perversely rich Keerson (Jean Louis Roux). Drugged by Meg, Elizabeth is brought to the locus of the black mass, the penthouse from which she will later be thrown. This final flashback follows a scene in which Paquette and Henderson have managed to corner one of Keerson's thugs. As in the previous instance, the straightforward, present-tense sequence is shot in a realistic style and includes only diegetic sounds. The abrupt cut to the flashback immediately evokes theatricality, first through the use of ritualistic music that becomes increasingly disturbing. Second, the flashback begins with a curtain obstructing the view. As Elizabeth and Meg enter the antechamber of the black mass, the camera passes through the curtain, denoting the beginning of the theatrical performance. Significantly, as the film closes on the shooting by Henderson of the Satanist Keerson, the curtain will re-appear to mark the end of theatricality and the return to some degree of normality as the camera moves from the curtained window to a shot of the city at night.

While the black mass in *The Pyx* is not as over-the-top as that of *Le Diable est parmi nous*, its visuals, sounds and acting style still explicitly theatricalize the scene. Religious chants, seemingly played backwards throughout the ceremony, give an otherworldly aura to the whole procedure, rendering this the most affected, «artificial » moment in the film. The chiaroscuro cinematography, the decor made up of drapes, candles and a few objects as well as the ritualistic costumes increase the artificiality of the passage. Karen Black's performance as Elizabeth in this scene also evokes an altered state of mind, with slow speech, solemn movements, heavy breathing and ethereal laughter. Flash edits connect the dark locale of the black mass with the chapel from the earlier flashback, especially through religious statues and, in particular, the figure of Jesus on the cross, filmed from a rapidly moving camera at an extreme low angle. Occasional returns to the present tense of the investigation only add to the impression of

theatricality, as the jarring interruption of the incantations and radical shift in tone and style intensify the clash between the normal world and the *locus horribilis*.

As Elizabeth walks through a room full of hooded figures holding candles, escorted by Keerson, devices such as very slow, languorous camera movement, soft focus and her solemn bridal demeanour link the moment to the heroin-induced romantic dream as a way to suggest that seeming opposites are actually related: romantic aspirations and descent into Satanism are both inspired by a need to escape the boredom of normal life and indulge in excessive sensory stimulation. As the image of a rat tied to an upside-down cross appears, the link between the church and devil worship is made evident: symbols are merely reversed. Similarly, the host presented to Elizabeth in the Pyx is to be desecrated by being absorbed through the vagina rather than the mouth. This is when Elizabeth breaks free from the satanic ritual and takes the host to put it in her mouth, thus reasserting her Catholicism but also enraging Keerson, who rushes to push her to her death.

When at the end of the film, the present meets the past and Henderson confronts Keerson in his penthouse-church, theatricality and realism come into direct conflict. While the décor still calls to mind the artificiality of religious ritual, Henderson's no-nonsense presence in that space «normalizes » it. Theatricality has not said its last word, however. As Keerson, played by the classically trained theatre actor Jean-Louis Roux, confronts Henderson about the sense of liberation he felt after his wife died, Christopher Plummer's performance as the detective becomes affected, wooden. «When your wife died in that accident, you were happy,» says Keerson,

you keep a little corner of morality inside that stinking soul of yours; a minor delusion to convince yourself that you still know good from evil. But you don't know it, Henderson. You don't know it until you touch it. Until you open yourself up to the power. When it manifests itself then you know that it's there. It exists. I have seen it. I have become it.

These words mesmerize Henderson. But as Keerson declares that he has become Evil, the temptation becomes too great and the detective hysterically shoots the Satanist.

A close up on Plummer's face, in a state of patent terror, represents the most ostentatious moment in the actor's performance. The subtle, understated expressions that characterized his realist performance throughout the narrative disappear for an instant and are replaced by the physiognomic *gestus* of abject horror. There is no ambiguity here. His face is fully readable as a theatrical sign of dread. In the end, however, as the Satanist monster falls to his death, subtle realism returns. The camera moves away from the theatrical curtain, and normality resumes its position of ascendancy, which it would keep for the next thirty years. From 1973 to 2003 there was not a single Quebec horror film that focused on devil worship, perhaps because Quebec culture was more concerned with other threats. But perhaps because of a renewed interest in Catholicism in Quebec in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, albeit under a different form,<sup>2</sup> Satanist cinema made a comeback with ***Sur le seuil***, a far better and more complex film than either ***Le Diable est parmi nous*** or ***The Pyx***.

While still dealing with a sect of devil worshippers (or more precisely, worshippers of «Evil»), Éric Tessier's ***Sur le Seuil***, based on Patrick Senécal's «roman fantastique» of the same title, shifts the locus of *Quebecus horribilis* away from the city, as is the case in the two earlier films, towards a rural setting. This suggests, I believe, that although Catholicism is still present in Quebec society, it is receding into the darker recesses of traditional French Canadian culture. Under the guise of a gory horror film, ***Sur le Seuil*** exposes a conflict between urban modernity and rural traditionalism. Historically, the rural space has been constructed, in films like Gilles Groulx's classic ***Le Chat dans le sac*** for instance, as the repository of the good old Quebec values that the urbanite must rediscover. Conversely, in ***Sur le seuil***, the countryside is depicted as the site of Evil.

In Tessier's film, the otherness of the rural space is radicalized through the excessive generic mode of horror to become what Foucault might call a heterotopia: a counter-

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<sup>2</sup> A 2007 survey concludes that even if churches remain poorly attended, 85% of Quebecers claim «loud and clear » that they are Catholic, and since 2002, there has been the emergence of a «popular Catholicism» movement that is more inclusive of various practices than traditional Catholicism. See Mario Girard, «Les Québécois croient en Dieu mais se tiennent loin des églises, » *La Presse*, 8 April 2007, p.A1.



site that opposes the site of normality. The heterotopia, says Foucault, is neither a utopia nor a dystopia, for it does exist at least at some level: «the heterotopia is simultaneously a mythic and a real contestation of the space in which we live» (Foucault 24). Foucault uses the mirror as an example of heterotopia, that is, a real space upon which we project an image of ourselves that is reversed. The concept of heterotopia is thus a useful term for a discussion of **Sur le seuil**. First, it signifies the relationship of otherness of the rural space *vis-à-vis* the city, for the countryside is *at once* the real site of tradition and history in contrast to the modernity of the city, *and* the mythical locus of gothic superstitions in opposition to the rationalism that governs the metropolis. The term also applies to the Satanist sect, which reverses Catholic symbology. And finally, theatricality can also be interpreted heterotopically as the alternative space of realist cinema.

Senécal's original novel **Sur le Seuil** is the first-person narration of a psychiatrist named Paul Lacasse (Michel Côté) who must take care of a new patient, Thomas Roy (Patrick Huard), a horror novelist who has purposefully cut off his fingers before trying to commit suicide. A jaded and cynical middle-aged man who thinks that he has seen it all, Paul initially perceives Roy's condition as a relatively banal case of psychosis. As the narrative unfolds, however, he becomes increasingly confused by the succession of strange coincidences surrounding the case. His investigation into the novelist's peculiar history leads him away from Montreal, to a remote village where Catholic religion meshes with satanic worship. He gradually comes to believe that Roy is the actual incarnation of Evil. The novel and the film conclude on a scene of murderous madness in the psychiatry wing where Roy is kept. In the middle of an orgy of blood and gore where dead bodies indulge in post-mortem carnality, Roy abducts Jeanne (Catherine Florent), Paul's pregnant colleague, and tears out the foetus from her womb. Paul and the police arrive in the nick of time and shoot the mad novelist, but not before he has managed to kiss Jeanne's nascent child and transmit evilness to the infant.

It is significant that the explosion of insane violence and terror in the urban hospital follows Paul's journey away from the city and into the heart of darkness of rural Quebec. In both the film and the novel, the passage from the urban norm to the rural heterotopia disrupts Paul's perception of the world around him at two levels. First, in concrete terms, the

Montrealer arriving in the village of Mont-Mathieu is disturbed by the eerie silence and emptiness of this village right out of 1940s *Grande Noirceur*. In the novel, Paul describes his arrival in Mont-Mathieu as follows:

Je me retrouve sur un petit chemin de campagne, sous un ciel couvert... la nervosité me gagne de plus en plus... Je passe devant un magasin général, quelques petites maisons colorées, des piétons plutôt agés qui me regardent d'un air méfiant... Je m'arrête et sors de mon véhicule. Le calme est total. L'église est entièrement isolée ... Une angoisse terrible me paralyse soudain... Et j'envisage alors très sérieusement de tourner les talons et de partir. Fuir... retourner à Montréal et prendre ma retraite. Point final. Tanpis pour Roy, tant pis pour les explications. (Senécal 341).

The terrible calm of the surroundings, the suspicious looks of the elderly locals and the isolation of the church do not only create a sense of dread in Paul, but specifically make him want to turn around and go back to Montreal, where he feels safe.

The last line of this passage also hints at the second level of disruption caused by heterotopia. Throughout most of the narrative, Paul seeks logical explanations for Roy's conditions. It is only when he is faced with this *other space* that he contemplates, for the first time, giving up on explanations. However, he does not turn around and give up his quest for meaning. Rather, he proceeds to interrogate the village priest, Father Lemay (Albert Millaire), from whom he hopes to get answers. But what he gets is a further challenge to his rational perspective. As the village priest relates the story of Roy's birth during a black mass, Paul's rationalism is gradually eroded. That a trustworthy figure like a priest could tell tales of a clergyman turned Satanist and of faithful parishioners turned devil worshipers clash with Paul's rational expectations. The slow, irrevocable recognition that Thomas Roy was born of evil is as unacceptable as it is undeniable. For the atheist, rational urbanite, the small village church where Roy was born during a black mass is the ultimate heterotopia that exposes, in its reversed religiosity, the fragile foundations of modern rationalism. As Paul leaves the village, he acknowledges that the horror that has unfolded in this «other space» undermines reason.

... je tourne la tête vers l'église. Elle se dresse contre le ciel noir, imposante... elle me semble terrible et menaçante. J'ai l'impression que des secrets immondes s'y trouvent camouflés et que, si j'ouvrais la porte, un flot de sang et de cadavres déferlerait jusqu'à mes pieds... Le père Lemay a raison, la vérité complète demeure dans l'ombre... Et même si je pouvais atteindre cette vérité, serais-je capable de la recevoir? (Senécal 388)

Paul's acknowledgement of his inability to apprehend the truth marks the culmination of the moment of horror as rationalism and realism are obliterated by terror. Troban Grodal, in *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings and Cognition*, calls «cognitive dissonance» this inability to «make sense» of supernatural phenomena, typical of rational characters in horror films (Grodal 247-249). Such cognitive dissonance causes profound angst in the character, as in the reader or spectator of tales of terror, when scientific certitudes are shattered by incomprehensible alterity.

In addition to geographical and religious heterotopias, Tessier's *Sur le seuil* also adds dissonance at the level of «mediatic» heterotopia. As certain critics have observed (Lessard A8), while the novel allows the reader to reflect along with the narrator on the complexity of Roy's case, the film cannot render the internal struggle of the characters in any other way than through images, sometimes gory, often uncanny but always superficial. Here the term «superficial» is not pejorative. It simply refers to the nature of the image that works as an affective surface that cannot appeal to the same cognitive functions as the written word. In the adaptation process, Tessier and Senécal (who co-wrote the script from his novel) simplified literary complexity and *theatricalized* the material to *embody* the horror that the original could convey only through abstract. As a result, while Senécal's novel devotes seven pages to the description of the moment of horror, the terrifying black mass that led to Roy's birth, the film limits itself to a two-minute montage of terrifying images that shatter the realist narrative of Paul's investigation.

As Father Lemay relates the events that led his colleague, Père Pivot (Nicolas Canuel), to turn against the church and create a sect of evil worshippers, flash edits and disturbing sounds clash with the present-tense tale to create a flow of gory tableaux of mutilated bodies and sacrificed

animals. The moment of horror culminates in the highly melodramatic confrontation between the Satanist Pivot and the senior priest, Père Boudreault (Jean-Pierre Bergeron). The succession of shots that interrupts Lemay's story is itself interrupted by a long take that shows the altar with Pivot on the floor before it and Boudreault on top of him. The scene looks like a staged encounter between lovers or mortal enemies, as the proxemic pattern conveys intense passion: hatred or love. In this case, it is neither and both, since the relationship between the two characters is one of heterotopia: the «evil» character is merely a mirror image of the «good» character, the former being as excessive as the latter in his devotion to his god.

Performance-wise, Nicolas Canuel as Pivot acts out the villainy of his character to the same degree as Jean-Pierre Bergeron acts out Boudreault's monstrous religiosity. In overdoing the *gestus* of religious declamation Bergeron foregrounds the danger inherent to both sides of any Manichean belief system. «Admettez vos crimes, monstre,» orates Boudreault, «implorez le pardon du seigneur. Tout de suite.» With the same degree of melodramatic immoderation, a dying Pivot responds «J'ai réussi.» Like Keerson in *The Pyx*, Pivot's proclamation that he has reached Evil functions as a performative utterance that brings evil into being through the very assertion of its existence. «Sois maudit. Ton âme va brûler en enfer pour l'éternité, m'attends-tu? Pour l'éternité» retorts Boudreault with gestures so broad that the performance would be laughable if the theatricality of the whole scene was not so terrifyingly dark that it interdicts laughter.

Whether they liked the film or not, critics described it in terms of its uncanny collage of shots (Bilodeau E12), its rapid editing that becomes almost unbearable, and its oppressive music that creates palpable tensions (Lessard A8). Paul's long reflexive monologues from the novel become a structured absence behind the flow of theatrical stimuli. The spectator senses a «lack » in the film that rapid images and frightful sounds attempt to veil but only make more manifest in the process. Sensory saturation destabilizes the spectator who is presented with too much information and comprehends too little of it. Through the adaptation process, Tessier and Senécal transformed the original novel into a theatrical heterotopia: an «other space» that defines the fast-paced cinematic moment of horror as what it is not, namely a

realist discourse on the collapse on rationalism. Cognitive dissonance in Tessier's film thus emerges from the clash between a novelistic character, who claims to operate at the level of reason, and the «other space» where he finds himself at the conclusion of the narrative journey. Therefore, the clash between the rational urbanite and the rural space of gothic horror is enhanced by the clash between the written discourse of the «roman fantastique» and its theatricalized film adaptation. The threat that the irrational rural space represents is rendered manifest in the theatrical attack on the rationalist novel.

***Sur le seuil, The Pyx and Le Diable est parmi nous*** may not be equally successful as horror movies, but they nevertheless share a similar status as films that simultaneously challenge the realist tradition of Quebec cinema through the excesses of theatricality and the Catholic tradition of French Canada through the threat of devil worship. Perhaps because they are thus doubly marginalized, these films have not received the critical attention they deserve. Hopefully this piece represents a first step towards a more thorough examination of Quebec's Satanist cinema.

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