

Fluid Relations: Québec Cinema and the Church

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La turbulence des fluides (réal. Manon Briand, 2002) © Alliance Atlantis Vivafilm

Abstract

Taking as its point of departure Manon Briand's *La turbulence des fluides* (Canada, 2002), this paper explores the relationship between religion and science, nationalism and secularism. In a post Quiet Revolution cinematic tradition of spiritual secularism, or religious atheism, *La turbulence des fluides* leads us along a journey reminiscent of the Old Testament stories, a journey that takes us through the birth place to uncertain waters to seismographs, desire, disorder, discovery, danger and love.

Reason and religion, technoscientific modernity and religion, these are oppositions that sustain a continued « return » of the religious as that which propels a social response to a certain alienation. Yet as we observe this « alienation », we quickly become muddled: is it religion or reason, technology or modernity that saves us from the loss of identity, of presence?

Fluid Relations proposes not an answer to these questions but an engagement with the complexity of worlds opened up when religion and technology, faith and (national) community begin to coincide.

Manon Briand's *La turbulence des fluides* opens with swishes of blue-black, dripping ink-like into the « The birth place, » the first section of the film. We are in Japan, the other side of the world from the birth place, where Alice has escaped, surrounded by the seismological high technologies allegedly required to predict the shifting future. At the low-tech birth place, Baie-Comeau, Québec, the tides have stopped. Alice is asked to return to the place of her birth to investigate whether there is a relationship between the missing tides and a coming earthquake. As we catch a glimpse of Alice's life in Japan, it quickly becomes apparent that Alice would much prefer to avoid the birth place altogether. Despite short-lived sexual escapades and the potential alienation of a computer-driven existence, Alice prefers the uncanny dis-position of foreignness and cultural distance to what she considers as the pretence of « home. » Already, we are poised to discover what it means to « be at home » in a world that calls forth, technologically as well as spiritually, our capacity for divination.

This exquisite film, which takes us on what sometimes seems to be an adventure of biblical proportions, leads us into a net of intrigue that engages with the intersections between the spiritual and the scientific, between reason and faith. In a post Quiet Revolution cinematic tradition of spiritual secularism, or religious atheism, we are led along a journey reminiscent of the Old Testament stories that takes us through the birth place to uncertain waters to seismographs, desire, disorder, discovery, danger and love. And yet, this film that calls forth many of the complexities of post Quiet Revolution Québec cinema [1] uses these devices to entice a synesthetic event that escapes strict categorization either on the secular/religious front or on the question of community. What *La turbulence des fluides* proposes, rather, is a story of fluid relations that offers an unusually nuanced engagement with the challenges posed by the interlocked futures of science and faith, of international environmental politics and extended communities, of life and death.

In his account of the sixth day, Alfred Whitehead states: « Our souls were not given, we 'became' souls » (1938: 41). To « become » a soul, Isabelle Stengers suggests, is to ask what it means to exist and to call forth a singular conflation between existence and knowledge, while understanding in advance that the « power of any condition always implies other conditions » (2004: 1). *La turbulence des fluides* explores the potential of this becoming. To explore this potential is to understand in advance that we do not yet know exactly what we mean by soul, that we do not yet know what we mean by religion, by science and, especially, that we cannot yet know where the interrelation of religion and science can take us.

To speak of religion is usually to speak of destiny: God will lead me where I need to go. When Alice is told she must board a plane to return to Québec, she is also told in no uncertain terms that her identity – her destiny – resides there, despite the fact that her ties to Québec are not any stronger than those she has created (or avoided) in Japan. « It could be a sign of destiny, » her friend tells her. « Come on! » says Alice, strict in her belief in the science of cause and effect. « Even the most unsuspecting fish return to their place of birth to die, » her friend continues. « You believe in too many things! » Alice responds.

Home is rendered both meaningful and meaningless. Two discourses are at stake, one that emphasizes the construction of space-time through events linked to a contingent becoming, while the other returns to the notion that home can be located within pre-destined circuits of birth and death where identity and territory are aligned [2]. These seem, at least on the surface, to be vastly different discourses, and to exemplify, in some sense, the secular direction Québec cinema and culture have taken since the Quiet Revolution. Yet, as I will argue here, these discourses are perhaps more intertwined than we might expect, leading us to rethink the ways in which the secular and the scientific call forth a certain religiosity that, despite secularization in Québec – or perhaps even because of it – continues to be at play within Québec cinema.

Jacques 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). Alice arrives in Baie-Comeau, where she is picked up and brought to a makeshift camp set up to study the missing tides. On their way to the camp, her driver asks: « How do you predict earthquakes? » « We don't predict, » she answers. « There are signs, indicators...perturbations in the magnetic fields, spinning compasses, ground irregularities, change of water levels in wells, changes in animal behaviour. » « Goldfish, » Alice continues, « are known to be very sensitive to these changes. » « Just animals? » he asks. « My wife has started drinking vodka.... » Alice is taken aback by his question. « No, » she replies, interrupting for the moment the possibility that irregularities in human behaviour could be identified as precursors, yet already drawing our attention to the potential of the « scientific » to be located within signs as opposed to laws.

Reason, understood here as the voice of Science, stands in contrast to the inexplicable which is usually understood as the Supernatural or Religion. This uneasy dichotomy propels the narrative of *La turbulence des fluides*. Yet, this duality is not set forth as stable. Rather, *La turbulence des fluides* finds ways to question whether

these terms are mutually exclusive as they are often claimed to be, and whether there are interchanges between their cultural scaffolds that may open the way to re-think not only the religious or the scientific event as such, but the manner in which an event creates the potential for a new kind of intensity of experience that can, in turn, call forth a re-thinking of the cultural and political norms framed by an active emergence – an event-ful – reading of the creation of the world.

Reason and religion, technoscientific modernity and religion, these are oppositions that sustain a continued « return » of the religious as that which propels a social response to a certain alienation. Yet as we observe this « alienation, » we quickly become muddled: is it religion or reason, technology or modernity that saves us from the loss of identity, of presence? Derrida argues that we must « understand how the imperturbable and interminable development of critical and technoscientific reason, far from opposing religion, bears, supports, and supposes it » (1998: 28). Uncanny superimposition of related discourses: religion and reason have the same source, despite the fact that we have a tendency to associate reason with philosophy, science, technology, knowledge, whereas religion is associated with faith and belief (without necessary recourse to « practical knowledge »). « Religion and reason develop in tandem, drawing from this common resource: the testimonial pledge of every performative, committing it to respond as much before the other as for the high-performance performativity of technoscience » (1998: 28).

To explain the correlation between reason and religion, Derrida identifies two intertwined but quite different aspects of « religion ». On the one hand, he argues, there is a structure of trust or belief, a structure tied to the fiduciary, to fidelity and blind confidence. On the other hand, there is the experience of the unscathed (*l'indemne*). These two aspects should not be reduced to one another, Derrida warns, particularly because it is quite common not to associate faith (or trust) with God, and because each of these aspects responds quite differently to the question of knowledge.

In principle, it is possible to sanctify, to sacralize the unscathed or to maintain oneself in the presence of the sacrosanct in various ways without bringing into play an act of belief, if at least belief, faith or fidelity signifies here acquiescing to the testimony of the other – of the utterly other who is inaccessible in its absolute source (Derrida 1998: 33).

The question of reason and religion thus shifts from a hierarchical system of « knowledge versus faith » to a more nuanced interrelation of different understandings and combinations of knowledge,

responsibility, trust. This nuance is palpable in the Baie-Comeau community foregrounded in *La turbulence des fluides*. Nobody knows where the tides went. People are perplexed, cautionary, yet they continue to live their everyday lives, even taking advantage of the situation: on the dry shore, they play golf among the deserted seaweed and the confused sea birds. This behaviour does not appeal to Alice, who takes environmental perturbances seriously. Immediately prohibiting games on the beach upon her arrival, Alice responds to the anomaly by seeking evidence: she smells, touches, tastes, and bottles water in a spare condom. While her tactics are questionable within a strict scientific discourse (a condom!?), the rift between her as the « knowledgeable scientist » and the « community » is palpable. For now, it seems like we are dealing with oppositional discourses: the scientist, the religious order (the nuns), the somewhat spiritual and generally misguided uninformed « secular public ».

Nobody can tell Alice for sure when the tides stopped. They weren't paying attention. The event registered only in its back-gridded tangibility. In keeping with the idea that these kinds of events can be organized – pre-located within identifiable scientifically-provable circumstances, Alice posts an advertisement in the local newspaper asking people to call in with news of anything odd that happened to them at 4pm the Thursday previous, the date established as the death of the mussel she found lying on the beach. The responses to the query are dizzying, and it only takes a few enquiries for Alice to get discouraged. The circumstantial evidence of the death of the mussel attracts all kinds of coincidences: a broken microwave that doubles for a UFO signal, sawed-down trees (and afternoon soap operas), mouth-emitting radio transistors, and sudden veering to homosexual attraction.

Religio stems from two potential sources: *relegere*, from *legere* (to harvest, gather), and *religare*, from *ligare* (to tie, bind). According to Benveniste, the etymology of *religio* as *religare* is invented by Christians to make the debt between man and God explicit. This ambiguity between gathering and binding seems to be at play within the community of Baie-Comeau in *La turbulence des fluides*, where there is a strong sense of the religious legacy (personified through the nuns who harbour the seismograph and through Claudette, the retired nun become bar-woman) and a definite overtone of changing times (the love-affair between the woman police-officer and Catherine, the unbaptised Chinese girl [Camille] adopted by the white unbeliever and general community do-gooder [Marc], the set-up of a scientific research camp for the study of the disappearing tides). Science and technology, secularism and religion seem to live side by side in this quiet town, relatively unscathed. At the surface, the story would seem one already told many times within Québécois cultural

texts: we have moved beyond the Church which now harbours only dying nuns and priests, we are the globalising, secular, technological, free society we fought to be in the Duplessis years.

But something more is at stake. Religion is at once too central and too peripheral to be cast aside as a fossil of less (or more) enlightened times. How to explain the strange occurrences such as Camille sleepwalking to the waterfront every night at exactly the time when the tides would have risen? Provocatively, *La turbulence des fluides* never seeks to. This is a rare film that allows us to explore the depths of our own prejudices, our own affiliations and renunciations. To not take a stand on these issues is to risk exploring the ways in which the secular calls forth the religious and to ask how community [3] structures itself around certain kinds of discourses of belief, faith and belonging. Manon Briand here does not seek to create a religious or a secular film, or even a film that can teach us something about the direct intertwining of these seeming oppositions. *La turbulence des fluides* is like the blur of the first shots, ink-like, uncertain, dripping into events we cannot yet predict. What Manon Briand does is allow us to enter into the creation of inexplicability that is at the heart of all events, offering us a moment of becoming that engages the event itself (the film, the « scientific quest », the religious/spiritual undertone) as an emergent re-creation of space-time from whence we are welcome to back-grid according to our tendencies and habits.

Whitehead writes, « We require to understand how the unity of the universe requires its multiplicity. We require to understand how infinitude requires the finite. We require to understand how each immediately present existence requires its past, antecedent to itself; and requires its future, an essential factor in its own existence... » (1938: 83-4). « We do not know anymore », Whitehead seems to be saying, « but we would like to understand ». « They were not *given* souls, but they *became* souls. » To be given (to know) and to become (to understand) are juxtaposed here, suggesting that to understand is not to know but to engage in the becoming of knowledge. As Stengers writes: « Knowing is about closed facts, facts we are able to define » (2004:1). For Whitehead, to understand is similar to what is at stake in the complex community of Baie-Comeau: it is to engage in an experience of disclosure that cannot be strictly defined as either valid or non-valid. To understand is to *become* with the knowledge that matters of fact are not irreducible to the One even while they remain potentially unknowable and unverifiable. This is not to juxtapose science and religion, to suggest that the realm of the unknowable relies on the relation between faith and the unscathed, but to suggest, rather, that science and religion bear a structure in common that refuses to reduce them to a matter of proof or to the

foreclosure of unrealized potentialities. As Derrida suggests, most of us do not possess the knowledge required to understand those technologies without which our daily lives have become unthinkable.

The explanation remains illusive. Noting Alice's instruments, Camille – the young Chinese-Canadian child – asks what she is doing. Catherine explains that Alice's probe is measuring the electricity in the ground. « Do you understand the way tides work? » Catherine asks Camille. « Think of it like a magnet », she continues, lifting Alice's shirt in the front to demonstrate the tides rising. « It is because the earth is attracted to the moon as it passes by. » « You'd have to raise the back of my shirt to explain it properly », adds Alice. This exchange signals the beginning of a slow shift in the ambiance of the film where the body becomes the pivot factor for the imbrication of religion and reason, science and politics. As Alice lifts her shirt to show that tides rise on one side of the world while they ebb on the other, Camille makes a political comparison. « It's like here and China », she replies, immediately relaying her experience as a child from the other side of the world to her alienation in her new place. « I would rather be like the others », she tells Alice and Catherine. Tides here connote the slow movements of identity and territory: Camille is cast outside the community because she is not baptized. Catechism classes are forbidden to her.

Visually, this scene is haunting. The camera's presence is uncanny as it slowly angles in onto the diverse bodies in its midst: first, the beach and the missing tide, then the scientific exploration, then the improbable community of cynical scientist, effervescent lesbian environmentalist, and atheist-through-inheritance Chinese-Canadian child. As the discourse shifts from science to the unknowable, from the body to religion, from politics to catechism, the camera inches in toward the bodies, finally settling in on the close-up faces of Camille, Catherine and Alice. Juxtapositions abound even as the camera forces these characters together: Camille was brought « home » to Canada from China, Alice left « home » for Japan, Catherine came « home » to Alice. Like a Deleuzian time-image that exposes its juxtaposed crystals, these close-ups call forth the impossibility of coherence even as they stimulate new opportunities for thinking relationally.

As night falls, another ambiguous relation is foregrounded, although, like many others, it remains tenuous and unspoken throughout the film. Unable to sleep, Alice goes to the all-night café where Colette, the ex-nun, works. As we find out later, Colette was the nun who took care of Alice when she was a baby at the nursery in the convent. Alice's disconnected stance makes it impossible for her to conceive of this improbability. Having been hurt by faith (in someone), Alice

has given up on anything that she thinks cannot be explained, human relations the first victims of her proto-rational stance. And yet, she can't sleep and is drawn, again and again, to the inexplicable. As Colette says toward the end of the film, « I often wondered by the grace of what kind of miracle I would ever re-encounter that child ». Alice and the love she will develop for Marc, Camille's nightly descent to the shores, the event of the missing and reappearing tides, these are only some of the miracles Colette cannot explain. Is there a religious explanation? Destiny? Redemption? Perhaps, but it does not seem likely: Colette left God to work at a bar, serving the people. *La turbulence des fluides* leaves us with eventful ambiguity as an enduring production of an uncertain notion of understanding. We understand these events only in the sense that we have lived through them: to understand is to experience, again.

The sixth day in Genesis differs from the rendition of the sixth day I am reading through Whitehead. It is the day of the creation of the animal kingdom:

And God said, let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind, and it was so. [...] And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Gideon's Bible, 2-3).

How does the shift from *given* to *become* happen for Whitehead in the midst of a narrative that ostensibly grants the human dominion over all to « subdue [the earth] »? Where are souls becoming, when it seems to the contrary that God gives them to us toward uncompromising futures? Stengers writes: « The experiences which came to matter of the sixth day are those which may be associated with the intense feeling of alternative, unrealized possibilities, that we could have done and did not do, what we could have chosen and decided not to do » (Stengers 2004: 4). For Whitehead, endurance is not an attribute but an achievement. To endure is to become, but not to become toward a given end. This is perhaps the lesson of Genesis, and one that *La turbulence des fluides* event-fully makes possible. After all, humanity did stand up to the summons of God, responding against his will, eating the apple not of knowledge, but of experience [4].

Experience lives in Camille's body. Late at night, she seeks the tide. Like the earth, she is attracted to the magnetism of the moon, to the

pull of the world. A certain world has been closed to her: the world of straightforward understandings of « home, » the gift of religion unassumed, the homogeneity of whiteness, the nuclear family, the mother alive. Camille is the saint-child whose innocence gathers the world to her side, she is the sensitive soul who gives herself to experience, and yet she is also the wise magnet through which worlds re-compose. Through Camille, Marc and Alice re-align, through Camille, Claudette returns to the nursery, through Camille, the white world of Northern Québec turns upside down. But this isn't a simple reversal. Camille suffers her difference bitterly, in tears on the bench outside her classroom during catechism, in grief for her drowned mother, in the absent sign of the tide that has carried away half of her ties to the new world.

La turbulence des fluides is therefore closer to Whitehead's account of the sixth day than to God's bellows in the Old Testament. Something endures. Something becomes. There is neither dominion nor transcendence, neither proof nor unscathed faith (*foi indemne*). « You would like there to be an earthquake! » Catherine accuses Alice in disgust. « At least it would explain things », she replies. Too many strange events surround the disappearance of the tides. « Everyone who came to us was a patient of Mrs. Vandal, [the drowned woman]! » Catherine reminds her, impatiently. « We're talking about the tide! These are memories, reactions! » replies Alice. « All at four o'clock? » asks Catherine. « They've arranged their testimony in consequence! They were her clients and now they have no one left to listen to them » says Alice. « As simple as that? » replies Catherine sarcastically. « Why not ».

Alice identifies Catherine as an esoteric. In Alice's scientific vocabulary, Catherine's approach is clearly juxtaposed to hers, where coincidences always hide a more rational explanation. In this « scientific » system, there is cause and effect to the extent that cause is pre-established and effect can be predicted. Is Alice's narrative not becoming more religious rather than more scientific? Is it not religion that emphasizes destiny as the prime compass of life?

If the sixth day is not about foreclosure but about becoming, it has something to teach us about the becoming-science of the religious and the becoming-religious of science. What Alice is relying on seems to be a religious science: when has science offered us certainties? She longs, it seems, for a [proto-scientific] God figure who knows the difference between right and wrong. Alice does not want to be swayed: she wants to believe in the law of her « science ». Beside her, Catherine seems to impersonate the becoming of an in-between: she takes no sides, seducing us with her openness. She functions neither according to the laws of religion nor science.

Catherine is perhaps the measure of the new world imagined in *La turbulence des fluides*, a world where a becoming-other is possible through the experience of the event, a future-in-the-past that speaks not of cause and effect but of endurance toward a yet-to-come.

« Endurance is...an achievement, the achievement of what goes on mattering » (Stengers 2004: 11). To matter is to become: matter and form are continuous extensions of each other, both concretely postponed. To matter is to become empirical where « [e]mpiricism...asks us to feel how intensely reasons matter » (Stengers 2004: 12). Everything matters in *La turbulence des fluides*. It matters that Alice's heart was broken by an ex-lover, that Alice was born in Baie-Comeau and loved by a nun, it matters that Catherine loves Alice, that Alice loves Marc, that Marc loves his lost wife. It matters that the dead body is found, magnetically. It matters that it is Québec, that Camille is Chinese-Canadian, that Claudette thought she would never again see Alice's eyes. Science matters. Religion matters. Matter is at stake, in the body, in the mass, form, weight, size, breadth of the world and its synchronous becomings.

In *La turbulence des fluides*, compasses go crazy, goldfish swim frenetically, the computer software warns, the people change, science is pitted against religion and experience is undermined by grief. No one knows what to think. « Do you know why the moon sometimes appears bigger? » a lonely, aging geologist asks Alice. « It's a question of surface gases », Alice begins to explain, bothered by his attention. It is night, and they are both on the dune, looking for the lost tide, unable to sleep or to solve the mystery. As it often does, the camera plays with their bodies, drawing closer, finding them in its lens, creating synergy between them. « No », he replies. « It's a hallucination, an emotional hallucination. The same phenomenon as when you are in love and everything appears to be bigger than it is. We do not realize to which degree we are controlled by it... ». Alice leaves, wandering in a superimposition of cinematic space-times, the music seeming to direct her through streets full of kids from another world, running, half-naked, from a swimming pool.

When science becomes hallucination, what happens to religion? There is no return, no return to religion, claims Gianni Vattimo. Religion itself is the figure of the return. Hallucinations deceive us. Could the hallucination itself not be thought as a return, a dream, a wandering of the mind? [5] To hallucinate is perhaps to become lost in the busy intersection between narration and truth, between religion as science and science as religion, between technology, reason and faith. There is no return in *La turbulence des fluides*, or if there is one, it will remain a hallucination, lost between the many versions of the

sixth day. Hallucinations are distinct from illusions: they do not promise a false belief, they seduce us toward another world.

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Notes

[1] See accompanying articles.

[2] For a more detailed analysis on the notion of home with particular reference to Québec and Canadian concepts of identity and territory, please see Erin Manning, *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home and Identity in Canada* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2003).

[3] The « community » as it is figured in *La turbulence des fluides* does not attempt to be homogeneous. In this regard, it is congruous with Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the « communauté désœuvrée », which suggests that community as such can only ever function as a homogeneous structure within a mythic (and too often fascist) discourse. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* trans. P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland, S. Sawhney. (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991).

[4] For a more detailed reading of the relation between the body, experience and God in Genesis see « Erring Toward Experience: Violence and Touch » in Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2006).

[5] Hallucination: 1604, « deceive », from L. *alucinatus*, later *hallucinatus*, pp. of *alucinari* « wander (in the mind), dream », probably from Gk. *alyein*, Attic *halyein* « be distraught », probably related to *alasthai* « wander about ».

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