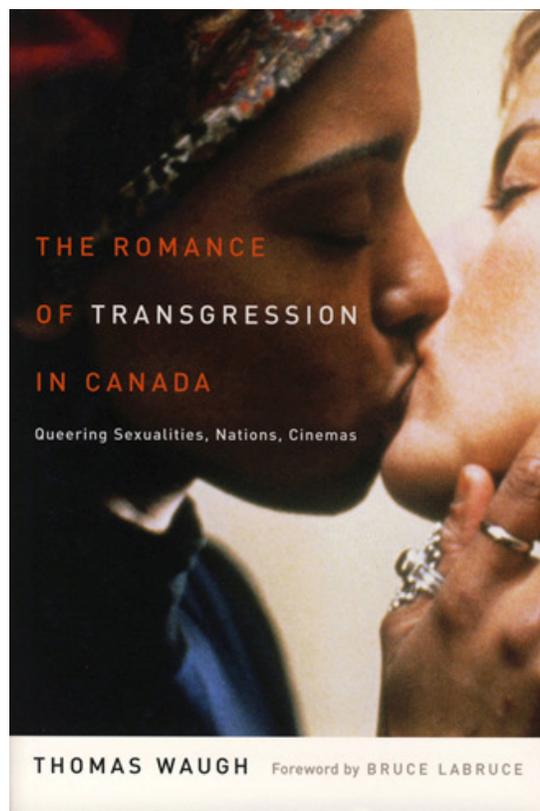


Thomas Waugh, *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.

Review by Jordan Arseneault and Donovan Rocher



When we first received a copy of Thomas Waugh's *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* we were expecting to read a Canadian version of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*:

*Homosexuality in the Movies*¹. Instead, Waugh incorporates an elaborate, yet remarkably accessible analysis utilizing Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Foucault introduced this concept and its potential utility in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*². This concept addresses the threads of discourses from civil society, politics and economics in order to develop a comprehensive socio-historical account of the regulation of bio-power (life force) in disciplinary societies. Waugh's clear and concise understanding of Foucault's concept allows him to make an engaging extension of this theoretical framework from an analysis of discourses to visual representations. In this manner, his archival excavation of film is able to depict the continuity of gender and sexualized representations within Canadian cinema.

Waugh is able to articulate how the earlier films of the 1960s that addressed the emerging crises in masculinity through film epics about sports were also used as a basis for queered representations. In this manner, it becomes possible to decode the significance of the symbols utilized in the later films and how they dialogue with earlier works. With these points in mind, the viewer is able to comprehend the re-signification of hockey in John Greyson's *The Making of "Monsters"*³ (1991) and how this contrasts with Gilles Groulx' *Un jeu si simple*⁴ (1964) and Hubert Aquin's *Le Sport et les Hommes*⁵ (1961). Greyson's portrayal reconfigures the homosocial in hockey to embrace, rather than disavow homosexual desire. This representation of the homosocial intensifies as his characters wear jockstraps and masks not in the usual manner, as instruments of protection, but in contrariety are sported as objects of sexual fetish.

For many of the earlier films, Waugh's offers a queer reading of the ambiguously sexualized characters. In

¹ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981)

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I. An Introduction*, Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, (1976) 1990)

³ *The Making of Monsters* Directed by John Greyson, Produced by Laurie Lynd and Louis Garfield, 1991

⁴ *Un jeu si simple* Directed by Gilles Groulx, Produced by Jacques Bobet for the National Film Board of Canada, 1964

⁵ *Le Sport et les Hommes* Directed by Hubert Aquin, Produced by Guy Glover Bobet for the National Film Board of Canada, 1959

Claude Jutra's *Wow*⁶ (1969), one of Québec's canonical *cinéastes*, the non-heterosexual character (Marc) takes a walk in the woods with an older Anglophone man whom he asks questions about life: "What about women?" and the old man answers "women are all right in their place." "How do you mean?" Marc asks; "Well, I've had experience," replies the old man. Marc then starts kneading clay and the old man says he should advertise to become rich from it, which Marc rejects as not being fun. "You have to be greedy: just think of yourself," recommends the old man. They then walk along the water and shake hands good-bye, saying he has had a "wonderful day." Marc calls across the lake in savage-sounding shouts, wearing an incongruously sexy faux-fur vest with no shirt and tight fashionable jeans. So there is no actual homosexual sex, but Waugh knows, and we now know (and can only intuit that Jutra "knew") that there is a queer subtext to this film. The male characters are beautiful, troubled, often half-naked, and in various degrees of involvement in the youth counterculture of Montreal in 1969. The women, by contrast, are confident in their convictions, less troubled by the ambiguities of their lives and loves, and are similarly attractive. Like Goddard without the misogyny, Jutra gives us a surreal and non-didactic pseudo-documentary that captures a few days in a particular time period, with a close-knit group of participatory actors to gaze upon, wonder at, and lust for. In *Romance*, Waugh interprets Jutra's romp through youth culture "in the context of a sex-gender system in flux, not so much transformation but freedom and trust unrestrained by rigid expectations and scripts."⁷ The film belongs to the pre-Stonewall period of queer art, in which actual non-heterosexual acts and thoughts were disguised and better left unsaid. We might thus situate the film somewhere between the proto-queer and the queer⁸ cultural products of the post-war period, broadly speaking. We welcome Tom's rereading, and his wonderful *catalogue raisonné* of Canada's non-heteronormative cinematic output. But we also feel obliged to dialogue with this scholar on his inclusions, and exclusions, of gender

⁶ Wow Directed by Claude Jutra, Produced by Robert Forget for the National Film Board of Canada, 1969.

⁷ Thomas Waugh The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) 72

⁸ Anything but pseudo-.

narratives and discourses other than his own, a task impeded by the fact that no one has seen as many of the films as he has, nor have they been given a reference tool as rich and interesting on the subject, until now. We will return for the moment to a discussion of Jutra's (some would say secondary) *Wow* and through it, pose the questions that Waugh has not asked and point to the ideological lacuna, which is not so much his Achilles' heel as it is his Achilles' perineum.

Most of the characters in *Wow*⁹ speak of being too young to "enter into the system," somehow accepting the inevitability of their selling out, but defying it nonetheless in the particular moment of society's encounter with them. What Waugh may overlook in his interpretation of Jutra's *Wow* is that the film's gender radicalism lies primarily in the mere absence of a linear heterosexual narrative. The fact that the women have much more interesting things to say could be seen as just a side-note if one is looking to interpolate a queer cultural reading into a work that is at once subtle and bombastic, intimate and histrionic, platitudinous and novel on all the oh-so-1969 issues of the Vietnam War, the Sexual Revolution, drugs, and social upheaval. In the brief flashback of Pierre's childhood, for instance, the character is depicted as a child in a surrealist, stark room with no furniture and his "*sympathique mère*" reading a magazine in the corner. In the place of the violent or alienating father we are shown Pierre playing with a seemingly domesticated porcupine, a symbolic amalgam, one might say, of the family pet, the displaced natural world, and the figuratively non-existent paterfamilias, whom we see only briefly as he plays a nostalgic modernist tune at the piano. Jutra closes his film with this incongruous scene of domestic peace, a flashback to that most perennial of gay themes, the pseudo-erotic mother-son relationship. The beautiful Pierre is brought to the contemplation of his family past through the stylistic inclusion of a now-ridiculous "Christmas-ball" editing effect and a self-aggrandizing fantasy

⁹ We must at this point also ask why the Office national du film currently catalogues this film as *Wow* whereas Waugh quotes the film as *Wow!* [Thomas Waugh *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) 61-3, 68, 71-5]. Is this a translation issue or rather a reference to the original movie poster?

of himself as a tunic-clad sitar player in an Orientalist salon. Pierre is hence the face of a generation in which the absence of parental authority is not problematized but is seen simply as a *fait accompli* of the young rebel/hippie/artist's life story. The fact that we are led into the scene as he smokes hashish with a decidedly androgynous and adoring friend, is not lost on the gay viewer. When a film ends with scenes that are crypto-homo,¹⁰ we can understand Waugh's zeal to use "queer" as a verb and re-read this work as any cultural critic should. But what is *not* being discussed here?

The great strength of Waugh's anthology-style opus lies in his foundational socio-historical interpretation of the queerness of the National Film Board and how this perspective filtered into the mainstream through the creators and discourses that it supported. In the pre-Stonewall social conditions Waugh so accurately describes, the "benevolent and philistine state bureaucracy"¹¹ of Montreal's Office national du film was an ideal breeding ground (and hiding place) for queer, proto-queer, and pseudo-queer artistic production. In a country where immigration and the post-war baby boom alleviated anxiety over the industrial world's soon-to-decline birth rate with a state that was economically sound, the stage was set for government-subsidized cinematic production, which was unconcerned with the propaganda norms of war, reproductive sex, and consumer values. The movies themselves, like Norman McLaren and Claude Jutra's *A Chairy Tale*¹² (1957), did not have to "sell" to a conservative capitalist distribution market, nor did they have to appeal to mainstream values of the Truman-Diefenbaker era. Waugh guides the reader, whether expert or neophyte, to an understanding of the contextual otherness of Canada's cinematic history, where the National Film Board intelligentsia fostered film production that did not depend on phallographic, capitalist, or militarist ways of thinking.

While Waugh contends that this makes Canadian cinema, and the Canadian state as a whole, essentially

¹⁰ We are indebted to John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) for this useful hyphenation.

¹¹ Thomas Waugh *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) 52

¹² *A Chairy Tale* Directed by Norman McLaren and Claude Jutra, Produced for the National Film Board of Canada, 1957

queer,¹³ one might also ask about the ideologically synchronous sources of these attitudes and the roots of the Sexual Revolution (SR), which Waugh schematizes according to British scholar Jeffrey Weeks's *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities*¹⁴. In Weeks's three-point description of the SR as a social phenomenon, feminism and the broad and lasting influence it has had on cultural production is subsumed under the post-Hegelian "reordering of old social antagonisms and the reappearance of new political movements," and simply "a shift in the relations between men and women"¹⁵. Moreover, Waugh's analysis is also atypical in how he offers an imminent reading of the earlier sociological works of John D'Emilio¹⁶ and Dennis Altman¹⁷ about the emergence of gay and lesbian communities in urban centers. Waugh describes how emerging global capitalism was colonizing different niche markets, which became part of the logic of corporatism in order to ensure both production and consumption. Gay liberation was in part supported by a motivation for profit and capitalized upon the burgeoning pink dollar, a political economy perspective of the Sexual Revolution that many cultural theorists have simply omitted. In this manner, Waugh pays homage to these intellectual pioneers and is able to expand upon the direction of their analysis without reverting to economic determinism. While queer intellectuality in film and society is situated in the illustrious pedigrees of Pasolini and Marcuse, any contribution that feminism may have made to the artistic problematization of gender and its cinematic expression is relegated to Second Wave Feminism's (or second-wave feminism's) attack on pornography¹⁸. In *The Romance of Transgression in Canada*

¹³ Thomas Waugh *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) xv

¹⁴ Jeffrey Weeks. *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985)

¹⁵ Thomas Waugh *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) 50

¹⁶ John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988)

¹⁷ Dennis Altman, *Coming Out in the Seventies* (Boston: Alyson, 1981)

¹⁸ Thomas Waugh *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) 217, 219, 274, 369, 535.

it is as if feminism's only import is in its supposed attempt to circumscribe the male gaze and visual autoerotic pleasure. Perhaps it is because Waugh's "Queering of Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas" is so encyclopaedic and informative—wowing any normal reader and making any *cinéphile* marvel at his breadth of knowledge and access—that his obfuscation of feminism seems so startling. Just as Waugh criticizes Richard Benner's *Outrageous!* for overstating its own "Canadianness"¹⁹, we must ask why Waugh is looking to enrich our knowledge of the forgotten and overlooked queerness of our cinematic past without seeing feminism as an integral part of that past. Queering is one thing, but the deeper critique to which he seems to aspire, of heteronormativity in a nation's artistic output in a given medium, is quite another. Although we might be indebted to Waugh for his dedication to the medium and his incisive commentary on our artistic collective history, we have to ask this *grand doyen* of gayness why feminism is not part of his account of the *Romance* he so eloquently writes about.

We look back at films like Jutra's *Wow* and see that so much of what Waugh does in his queering is so very accurate, so very affirming of a transhistorical sexual otherness that the non-phallocratic, non-capitalist, non-heterosexual artist might claim as his or her own history. Through the lens of "the economics of sexual marginality," Waugh sees feminism as nearly irrelevant, perhaps because he sees it as economically unimportant. Might he not have asked himself what has kept feminism on the margins of his own interpretive schema? Just as Jutra's brilliantly verisimilar characters "*ont conçu eux mêmes le scénario de leur rêve*,"²⁰ so did the emergence of non-heteronormative art depend on the collective, synchronous *dreaming* of queer *and* feminist writers, artists, and activists. It is not coincidental that the original poster image for *Wow* was a pointillist image of the character Monique's "autoerotic

¹⁹ Thomas Waugh *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) 94

²⁰ *Wow* Directed by Claude Jutra Produced by Robert Forget for the National Film Board of Canada, 1969. Prologue text: "they conceived on their own the script of their dream."

fantasy of psychedelic trampolining”²¹, whereas now the NFB’s DVD re-release finally gives us what Jutra may have secretly wanted, and what Waugh and we gays really want on frontispieces now, which is the image of the character Flis’s perfect male buttocks as he streaks down rue Sainte-Catherine in broad daylight, albeit on green screen (with the soundtrack “I love you so-o-o...”). Whereas the use of the female body to “sell” an art film is no longer considered appropriate, the visual pleasure of the gay male gaze has become a signifier of the new found legitimacy of a queer hermeneutic. Regardless of which gendered body now represents this iconic work of proto-queer Canadian cinema, an accurate study of its significance must take into account the same variety of discourses that contributed to its making. And there is at least as much gender critique in the proto-feminism of Jutra’s characters as there is in their proto-queerness.

On a final note, we must commend Tom for his ability to invoke strong emotional resonance with his audience during his exploration of Canadian cinema. His frank admissions (describing desire with himself as its conduit) and autobiographic detail add a layer of understanding about the particular socio-historical context of the periods of the films in which they screened. Waugh provides a detailed autobiographical account of the very pulse of the gay and lesbian community during the height of the AIDS pandemic. Tom’s description echoes our own reaction to John Greyson’s *The ADS Epidemic* (1987)²² at that point in time: we simultaneously wanted to laugh and cry. Greyson brilliantly confronted the terror associated with sex in a musical about a fictitious diagnosis of ‘acquired dread of sex’ and mocks the fear tactics of the safe sex campaigns. *ADS* promoted a jovial reinvestment of corporeal desire into sexual activity. As in *Out/Lines*²³, Tom has reinvested our queer past with the desires and complications that its cinematic creators may have wanted us to see all along.

²¹ Thomas Waugh *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006) 63

²² *The ADS Epidemic* Directed by John Greyson, 1987.

²³ Thomas Waugh *Out/Lines: Underground Gay Graphics from Before Stonewall* (Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002)

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