

The Contemporary Horizons of Quebec Cinema:
A Review of Quebec Cinema in the 21st Century:
Transcending the National, edited by Michael Gott
and Thibaut Schilt (Liverpool: Liverpool University
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Since Bill Marshall's *Quebec National Cinema* (2001)¹, a growing body of scholarly work in English has addressed Quebec cinema's recent evolution and its internationally recognized creative talents, including Xavier Dolan and Denis Villeneuve.² Two decades into the new millennium seems a reasonable period to evaluate contemporary cinematic tendencies and directions; Gott and Schilt have seized the moment to produce an important volume on the diversity and transnationalism of the new century's productions, bringing together ten scholarly perspectives along with three interviews with directors whose work embodies the theme.

The volume's introduction clarifies the title expression "transcending the national," which the editors explain "refers to a process" whereby contemporary Quebec cinema "extend[s] beyond national constraints and identifications while simultaneously reinforcing [...] the national quality of the films, directors, funding and promotion infrastructures, and identity formations" (5). This tension, which Bill Marshall previously identified in his landmark study, is seen by Gott and Schilt as key to situating Quebec's recent productions within the context of *cinéma-monde*, a construct or global tendency for which Quebec cinema seems to offer a microcosm, as per Marshall.³ The editors posit a significant change in the horizons and representations on offer since the turn of the millennium, notwithstanding co-existent and arguably

contrary tendencies such as the nostalgic motif explored in the 2020 volume, *Cinema of Pain: On Quebec's Nostalgic Screen*.⁴ What Gott and Schilt offer here is rather an expansion on the 2019 issue of *Contemporary French Civilization* devoted to transnationalism in the Quebec film and media landscape.⁵ They make a concerted effort to fill in some of the gaps of that thematic journal issue, by including several chapters on Indigenous representations (of or by First Nations peoples located within the contemporary “nation,” be it Quebec or Canada), and on multilingualism, immigration, and migrant subjects, all tropes or characters that allow for the exploration of diversity, geographies and borders, and perspectives that problematize the national on a number of levels.

While the “inherently global orientation of Quebec’s film industry and cinematic output since the beginning of the new millennium” (3) is undeniable, it should not be forgotten that transnationalism was present even in the earliest feature films shot in the province (such as Russian immigrant director Fedor Ozep’s *Le père Chopin* and *La forteresse* from 1945 and 1947, respectively), and that many of the National Film Board’s celebrated first generation of Québécois directors working in the 1960s and beyond made some of their films outside of the province or about its immigrant or Indigenous populations, including Gilles Carle, Jacques Godbout, Gilles Groulx, Arthur Lamothe, and Claude Jutra, who worked with French New Wave director Jean Rouch in Africa and whose portrayal of an interracial relationship in 1964’s *À tout prendre* offered a probing commentary on Quebec national identity and the increasingly cosmopolitan face of Montreal. In other words, while transnationalism is not new in the history of Quebec’s cinema, and while more of this contextualization could perhaps have been offered in their introduction, what Gott and Schilt present in *Quebec Cinema in the 21st Century* makes clear that going beyond the boundaries of national identity and provincial borders is integral to its contemporary film practices and productions.

The ensuing ten chapters are divided into three parts, “(Re)definitions,” “Trends and Genres,” and “Case Studies,” and the volume closes with three interviews with Denis Chouinard, Bachir Bensaddek, and Marie-Hélène Cousineau, all representative figures of the impetus to make other voices heard in Quebec cinema, and thereby to expand its inclusivity. The chapters in the book’s first section, by Michael Gott, Karine Bertrand, and Ylenia

Olibet, respectively deal with borders and boundaries in six recent films, the work of Arnait Video Productions (an Inuit/Québécois collaboration), and filmmakers Chloé Robichaud and Sophie Deraspe, whose work has garnered success at national and international festivals. This eclectic selection of subjects is both the weakness and the strength of such a volume, as it may seem challenging to readers to see how such perspectives work together—here under the “(Re)definitions” rubric—, even as the variety of approaches actually substantiates the extent to which transnationalism, or at least the questioning of identity boundaries and physical borders, are everywhere in Quebec’s recent cinematic output.

Gott’s chapter offers a broad consideration of mapping, “hard and soft borders and borderlands” (35), and how these motifs shape a sense of belonging in six films: Marie-Hélène Cousineau’s *Uvanga* (2014), Geneviève Dulude-De Celles’ *Une colonie* (2019), Bachir Bensaddek’s *Montréal la blanche* (2016), Ky Nam Le Duc’s *Le meilleur pays du monde* (2020), Chloé Robichaud’s *Pays* (2016), and Philippe Falardeau’s *Guibord s’en va-t-en guerre* (2014). These films’ titles alone are evocative, with the Inuktitut word *uvanga* meaning “I, me, mine,” which implies identity but also what is “not mine” or other, while the remaining titles all evoke country (*pays*), community or place (*colonie*, Montreal), ethnicity (*la blanche*, an ironically “racial” color here that simultaneously also evokes Algiers for the protagonists and Quebec’s snowy winters), or a political situation that requires taking sides (subtly underscored by *-bord* in the name Guibord) against an opponent, thus reaffirming a sense of collective identity. In his reading, Gott effectively shows how these films open up “a space of translation and exchange, forging new positions between reimagined local and reoriented global frameworks” (65). Bertrand’s chapter returns to *Uvanga*, along with the other two films of the “Arnait trilogy,” *Before Tomorrow* (2009) and *Restless River* (2019, based on Gabrielle Roy’s short story, “La rivière sans repos”), to show how the collaboration between Cousineau and the Inuit elders of Igloodik foregrounds issues of interculturality, mixed identities, and the tension between modernity and tradition under the overarching concept of relationality, as theorized by Cree scholar Shawn Wilson.⁶ It is noteworthy that Queen’s University, Bertrand’s home institution, has been collaborating with the Arnait collective to collate, translate, digitize, and preserve these women’s films and media archives. The final chapter in this section is devoted to two Québécois women filmmakers,

Robichaud and Deraspe, whose respective films, *Sarah préfère la course* and *Antigone*, interrogate gender and identity norms. In an industry still dominated by male stories, protagonists, and directors, recognition of the need to bolster women's film work was formalized with the creation of Réalisatrices équitables in 2007, but it took funding agencies another ten years to take formal steps in that direction, with the SODEC launching in 2017 the 1 + 1 rule of funding two projects per producer provided one is written or directed by a woman. Olibet's chapter offers an overview of the current generation of Quebec women filmmakers, some of whom have benefited from the new funding paradigm, before presenting the leadership of her two chosen directors through their women-centered films and subsequent interviews. While it may still be a bit of a stretch to talk about a "transnational feminist social vision"⁷ shared by these filmmakers, it is nonetheless evident that Robichaud and Deraspe are clear-eyed about their roles and the effects of their creative and promotional choices as women in the industry.

Given that Quebec's territory is more than 50% forested, Tolliver, in the book's "Trends and Genres" section, considers the Québécois as a "forest people," offering historical grounding for her analysis with Paul Gury's post-war films, *Un homme et son péché* and *Séraphin* (iconic stories combined in Binamé's remake in 2002), and juxtaposing Gury's portrayals of settlers' deforestation for agricultural purposes with the more recent preoccupation with forest fires and environmental destruction in *Il pleuvait des oiseaux* (Louise Archambault, 2019) and *Avant les rues* (Chloé Leriche, 2016). This contrast allows Tolliver to offer some compelling insights into the settler colonization that is central to cultural and geographical memory and identity in Quebec. She then exposes the other films' blind spots through the alternative vision presented in Leriche's film of a "relationship of mutual belonging" (135) with the land, a core principle of the Atikamekw and other First Nations lifeways since time immemorial. The following chapter, Boisvert's take on Quebec popular cinema's transnational influences and ambivalence with respect to American hegemony, returns to a more direct engagement with the volume's transnational theme. Boisvert shows both the ability of comedy to embody Quebec's contemporary zeitgeist, and its concomitant capacity to reach domestic audiences and box office success, despite the dominance of streaming and thus US platforms and productions. In so doing, she highlights the reliance of Quebec's industry on "male narratives and a male

star system to ensure its profitability” (158). Given that several earlier chapters, including Olibet’s, emphasize women’s films, Boisvert’s analysis is a reminder of the need for greater equity and diversity in mainstream filmmaking. Rounding out this section is Bill Marshall’s consideration of the zombie films *Les affamés* (Robin Aubert, 2017) and *Blood Quantum* (Jeff Barnaby, 2019). Using Jameson’s exegesis on allegorical interpretation, and recalling Freitag and Loiselle’s earlier scholarship on horror films,⁸ Marshall weaves together the forces shaping the international proliferation of zombie films and the specific purposes to which the genre is put, in the hands of actor-director Robin Aubert and the Mi’kmaq creative powerhouse, Jeff Barnaby.⁹ In reading *Les affamés*, Marshall unpacks its multiple possible allegorical readings, settling at last on its message of alienation and loss that he contextualizes within Quebec’s colonial history. It is in *Blood Quantum*’s critique of colonialism that Marshall finds its particular power, through its appropriation of horror and zombie conventions as a way to express generational trauma, the threat of environmental catastrophe, and the history of Indigenous-settler conflicts where, for once, it is Indigenous “blood” that offers the hope of survival, rather than a death sentence. This chapter in particular offers a clear example of how the specificity of Quebec’s cinematic productions relate to broader transnational tendencies and how its filmmakers exploit genre films and their conventions to create multiple levels of meaning of both local and global relevance.

The four “Case Studies” of part three deal with the work of specific directors, either singly or in pairs. Jean-Marc Vallée and Denis Villeneuve, celebrated for their careers in Hollywood, are examined by Gemma King not as examples of linear international success stories but for the consistent “interplay between the local and the global” (189) and for the persistent traces of their Quebec sensibilities in their work, which she identifies in their focus on “border-crossing, regional identities, and multilingualism” (197) and in their stylistic choices, be they minimalist in Vallée’s case, or environmental and auteurist, in Villeneuve’s. King’s chapter includes a useful appendix devoted to language and coproduction details for each director’s body of work. In Schilt’s consideration of one of the leading figures of what has been called the Quebec New Wave, Denis Côté, the director’s fourteen features to date are presented as belonging to two categories, either more spontaneous and low-budget projects, or “bigger” scripted films with broader appeal,

such as *Curling* or *Vic + Flo ont vu un ours*. Schilt's chapter devotes some consideration to the enduring mystery of why this director, recognized as one of Quebec's premier film auteurs for his distinctive aesthetics and idiosyncratic vision, has not received the same appreciation domestically as he has on the international festival circuit. The following chapter, by Mercédès Baillargeon (whose collaboration here, along with Bertrand's, confirms that this volume builds upon their 2019 co-edited special journal issue), explores another internationally celebrated auteur, Xavier Dolan, for his ambivalent relationship to queer identity politics, expressed most clearly in his refusal to accept the 2012 Queer Palm at Cannes. Baillargeon selects Dolan's *Tom à la ferme*, *Juste la fin du monde*, and *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*, the first two adapted from plays, in order to show how Dolan's propensity for excess and disruption, and his thematization of the inability to communicate, reflect queerness as what is "unsayable, unwritable, and unrepresentable" (231). Given his iconic status and his international as well as domestic success, it would be hard to imagine this volume without a chapter on Dolan, even though his work has already elicited more scholarly interest than perhaps any other living Quebec director. The volume's final scholarly contribution is Bourdeau and Kearney's comparative take on the work of Dolan and Monia Chokri, an appropriate ordering given that she acted in some of Dolan's films, and that her own filmmaking career began subsequent to their collaborations. This chapter offers an intriguing examination of the difference a generation can make, homing in on the millennial preoccupations of representation and diversity, as well as the specifically woman-centered gaze that Chokri's films offer, by contrast with Dolan's portrayals of (queer) masculinity. Bourdeau and Kearney's analysis of transnational influences as well as distinctly local ones in Dolan's *Matthias & Maxime* and Chokri's *La femme de mon frère* is particularly welcome as an illustration of the volume's theme of transcending the national.

The volume's conclusion—the three interviews with Denis Chouinard, Bachir Bensaddek, and Marie-Hélène Cousineau—offers further proof that, as Chouinard puts it, "the definition of the Québécois is now much broader and more inclusive than it was twenty years ago" (275). It is perhaps fitting that the editors left the final word to these practitioners who have devoted their careers to telling stories of the "other", or telling other stories, about what being Québécois can or does encompass in the twenty-first century.

This volume, with its various perspectives and case studies, is ultimately a testimonial to “the centripetal and centrifugal forces”¹⁰ or the “inward and outward” impulses in Quebec’s contemporary cinema, as identified by Marshall and Schilt, respectively (191). Such tensions will undoubtedly continue to shape the future horizons of the complex, increasingly diverse, and at times equivocal productions of Quebec’s *cinéma-monde*.

Author Biography

A recipient of the Ordre des Francophones d’Amérique and the Prix du Québec, Miléna Santoro has built her career on exploring the transnational and cross-cultural connections between Quebec’s literary and filmic practices and its global counterparts and influences. Her research on Quebec’s feminist literary tradition, transatlantic cultural exchanges, and its indigenous cinema appears, respectively, in the books *Mothers of Invention*, *Transatlantic Passages*, and *Hemispheric Indigenities*. Her most recent co-edited critical anthology, *Touching Beauty: The Poetics of Kim Thúy* (2023), was a finalist for the Gabrielle Roy book prize. Her current research focuses on adolescence in Quebec cinema since 1999.

Notes

1. Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).
2. See Andréé Lafontaine, ed., *ReFocus: The Films of Xavier Dolan* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), and Jeri English and Marie Pascal, eds., *The Films of Denis Villeneuve* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).
3. Bill Marshall, “*Cinéma-Monde? Towards a Concept of Francophone Cinema*,” *Francosphères* 1.1 (2012): 35-51.
4. Liz Czach and André Loiselle, eds., *Cinema of Pain: On Quebec’s Nostalgic Screen* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2020).
5. Mercédès Baillargeon and Karine Bertrand, eds., “Introduction: le transnationalisme du cinéma et des (nouveaux) médias: le contexte québécois,” *Contemporary French Civilization* 44.2-3 (July 2019): 137-150.
6. Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008).
7. Patricia White, *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 5.
8. Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019); Gina Freitag and André Loiselle, “Tales of Terror in Québec Popular Cinema: The Rise of the French Language Horror Film since 2000,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 43.2 (2013): 190-203. Freitag and Loiselle developed this theme in their co-edited volume *The Canadian Horror Film: Terror of the Soul* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

9. Jeff Barnaby died prematurely in 2022. His body of work, including several acclaimed shorts and two feature films, was commemorated in 2023 by the launching of the Jeff Barnaby Award by ImagineNATIVE, with support from Netflix's Fund for Creative Equity.
10. This conceptualization is borrowed from Bakhtin. See Bill Marshall, "Worlds Within: In the World," in *Cinéma-monde: Recentered Perspectives on Global Filmmaking in French*, Michael Gott, and Thibaut Schilt, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 326.