Book Review. *The Historical Imaginary: Quebec National Cinema in the Twenty-First Century*, by Amy J. Ransom (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2026), 294 p.

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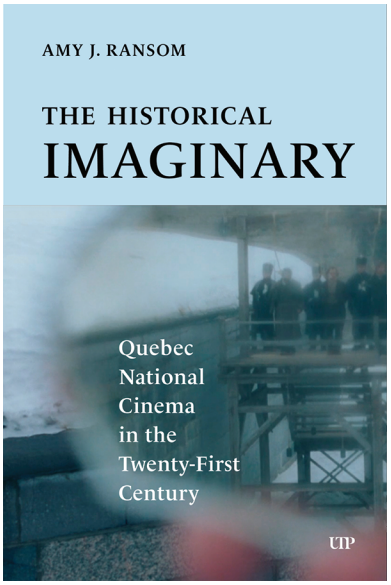

For Anglo-capable scholars, the arrival of Amy J. Ransom's monograph *The Historical Imaginary: Quebec National Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* is an important development. It follows on the heels of Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt's anthology *Quebec Cinema in the 21st Century: Transcending the National*,[1] and together these books illustrate key changes in how film history, including the history of "small" or sub-state cinemas like Quebec's, has come to be written over the last 25 years. It was not surprising that Miléna Santoro's review of the Gott and Schilt anthology in *Nouvelles Vues* 23–24 opened by invoking the legacy of Bill Marshall's 2001 monograph *Quebec National Cinema*,[2] which can be seen as the last book of its kind to be written in English about Quebec cinema. In French the situation is comparable, with Yves Lever's *Histoire générale du cinéma au Québec*, originally published in 1988, being issued in a "Nouvelle édition refondue et augmentée" in 1995[3] and now seeming basically inconceivable from a methodological standpoint. What has been gained with this shift, and what has been lost?

It is worth recalling that Marshall's book was supposed to be published by another press. He writes in the introduction that "the idea of this book was rejected by another publisher's series on national cinemas on the grounds that Quebec 'is not a nation' whereas 'Canada is.'"[4] This attempt to be tactful could not overpower what the book's likely readers would have known in 2001: he was talking about Routledge's "National Cinemas" series. This ran from 1993 to 2008, publishing thirteen volumes in total, all with titles such as the late Chris Gittings's 2001 entry *Canadian National Cinema*, to mention the one that seems to have displaced Marshall's proposed contribution. The countries represented in the Routledge series were France (1993/2005), Australia (1996), Italy (1996), Britain (1997/2008), Denmark/Finland/Iceland/Norway/Sweden (1998), Canada (2001), Germany (2002/2007), Spain (2003), Ireland (2004), China (2004), Mexico (2005), Brazil (2007), and South Africa (2008). But what Marshall said just after reporting the somewhat clueless editorial comment from (what I presume is) Routledge is more important for our considerations here: "My argument, that Quebec certainly is a nation and has a national cinema, and that *these terms are still useful*, whatever or rather because of the problematizing gloss I give them, does not, however, lead to any conclusions for or against the sovereignty project."[5] I have added those italics because even in 2001 the jig seemed to be almost up for "these terms." In 2025 that's even more the case, as the subtitle of the Gott/Schilt anthology, "Transcending the National," seems to demonstrate.

Among the reasons that "these terms"—nation, national cinema—seem to be falling out of fashion (or, to put it more kindly, are not universally seen by film scholars as "still useful") are that they impose unity and clarity on large and inherently diverse corpuses in ways that a pluralism-first writer might see as limiting. For such a writer there are thus two main problems: (1) to write any kind of "national" history about the territory of Quebec is to occlude Anglophones or Indigenous peoples, groups who have made it clear through their political representatives that they do not feel themselves to be part of that nation (that's more true of Indigenous political actors than Anglophone ones); and (2) to write a general history of a "national cinema" is impossible unless one really is dealing with every film made there (something that is actually possible with, say, Iceland,[6] but is not feasible with Quebec simply because of the number of films that have been made there since the 1890s). It is worth taking each of these problems in turn.

Let's start with (2): general histories can seem impossible to write, no matter what the subject matter, and can seem especially so with cinema, inasmuch as the corpus, in non-Icelandic places, can often seem made up of an impossibly large number of discrete objects demanding treatment. Ransom addresses this impossible largeness in the book's first paragraph, wherein she writes "Picking up where Marshall left off, I first undertook this study as a comprehensive survey of Quebec's film production in the twenty-first century. As the size of the corpus grew, however, over the course of two decades, it became clear that no single volume could do it justice" (3). She goes on to say that her book therefore "chooses a specific corpus of films: those set in a past time frame." For sure that kind of filter will lead to a more manageable group of films, at least more manageable than Quebec cinema in the twenty-first century might seem to be; her "Filmography" in the book's apparatus lists 101 films—a big number, and yet far from infinite. But even this kind of limitation creates problems that immediately lead us back to (1).

Ransom's serious and well-informed attempt to figure out what to do with films by Indigenous directors is a prime example. Explaining her decision to exclude Zack Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* but engage with Inuit films like Kunuk's *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* or Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu's *Before Tomorrow*, Ransom writes that these latter two works "received tax credits and other support from the Province of Quebec, and the latter was co-directed by Madeline Ivalu and Québec-born [Marie-]Hélène Cousineau" (23). Cousineau is indeed a key figure in Inuit media-making, having moved to Igloolik in 1990 where she helped found the Tariagsuk Video Centre and later the women's video workshop Arnait, both of which were modelled in part after the Montreal co-op Vidéographe.[7] Ransom then writes that "It was a more difficult decision—one ultimately made for reasons of time and space—to omit analysis of two films that revisit the 1990 Oka Crisis, Sonia Bonspille Boileau's *Rustic Oracle* (2019) and Tracey Deer's *Beans* (2020)" (23). But all of this is relatively secondary to a question about Indigenous films that she asks just above: "But to what extent do such films belong to the category 'Quebec national cinema'? While on the one hand, excluding the Indigenous presence from depictions of life in Quebec represents a dangerous elision, on the other, including Indigenous films in a study of settler films might be considered a colonizing gesture in and of itself" (23). These questions of unfair exclusion and enforced inclusion

can easily spin out of control, and it is good that Ransom doesn't let herself get tied up into too much of a knot over them. But what we can see here is that leaving behind an older model of "general history" (a study of Quebec cinema) and following a model that is more explicit the specific kinds of films under discussion (a study of feature-narrative films made in Quebec and set sometime in the past) only creates new sets of problems: unanticipated by scholars following the earlier model, but substantial nevertheless.

What the newer and more explicitly constrained model allows for, though, is more genuinely *interpretive* history; that is to say, an analysis that allows a reader to understand key issues both in historical context and in terms of how those issues are dealt with in specific objects. Ransom's overall analysis is of central importance to this issue of *Nouvelles Vues*, and she first lays it out explicitly via a comparison of two films about the Patriotes: "Throughout this volume, I argue that the year 2000 represents a watershed date in the development of Quebec film… Whereas Michel Brault's *Quand je serai parti… vous vivrez encore* (1999) marks the end of an era, Pierre Falardeau's *Le 15 février 1839* (2002) inspires a new generation of auteurs who continue to memorialize for contemporary Québécois the oppression and resistance of the past" (31). I have also written about these two films alongside one another,[8] and I agree wholeheartedly with Ransom's analysis that the former was among the last traces of an older model for Quebec cinema (a national cinema as resistance to dominant culture, a resistance conducted on aesthetic as well as ideological grounds) whereas the latter was exemplary of its emergent model that we can see today in a well-developed form (a quasi-Hollywood, smaller-scale commercial cinema with conventional formal patterns but subject matter rooted in local political issues). For Ransom, this is on balance a positive development, although she does seem to remain a bit uncertain:

> In my view, Quebec's popular film successes, like the *Les Boys* franchise, but also the heritage films and biopics discussed in chapters 3 and 4, contribute, for better or for worse, much more to a sense of shared national identity than do the independent art films viewed by a handful of critics and cinephiles in Montreal. By offering a homegrown alternative to Hollywood genre films, Quebec's cinema as an industry (perhaps rather than as an art) projects a positive image of the collective self. (178–79)

And so, we are back at (1), which is to say the continued usefulness of a word like "nation" (or in this specific case, a term such as "national identity"). Ransom clearly believes, to return to Marshall, that "Quebec certainly is a nation and has a national cinema, and that these terms are still useful." That is something of a consensus position in French-language studies of Quebec's cinema, so much so that it is rarely spelled out explicitly in that body of critical and historical work. In that way this book strikes me as more consistent with work done in French than the Gott/Schilt's anthology *Quebec Cinema in the 21st Century: Transcending the National*, something I would have earlier said about the relationship between Marshall's *Quebec National Cinema* and Joseph I. Donahue's 1991 anthology *Essays on Quebec Cinema*,[9] the latter sometimes displaying a certain scepticism about the seriousness of Quebec nationalism that was an earlier version of the more *au courant* scepticism of a formulation like "transcending the national."

Taken as a whole I basically disagree with Ransom's argument. In the final analysis she thinks a more commercial-popular cinema is good for the Quebec nation; she's for Falardeau (an image from *15 février* is the book's cover) as pathbreaker for Anne Émond or Xavier Dolan. I on the other hand lament the loss of the centrality of the idea of cinema as an intellectual project and think this loss will, in the long term, undercut the viability of Quebec's national project as a whole; I am for Pierre Perrault and Anne Claire Poirier as models that filmmakers such as Catherine Martin and Chloé Robichaud tenaciously try to revise and update. But this argument that I disagree with is offered here with a lot of verve, clarity, and focus, and with considerable attention to contemporary cultural and political context. Thus, there really is no question that it is a major intervention both in Cinema Studies and Quebec Studies.

My most significant misgiving is a macro-level one. Earlier studies such as Marshall's *Quebec National Cinema*, or for that matter Janis Pallister's *The Cinema of Quebec: Masters in Their Own House*,[10] were at the time and still remain invaluable because they did a certain kind of broad-strokes spadework that in turn enabled more focussed studies of specific periods, filmmakers, trends, etc. That kind of work, as I readily acknowledge above, was more partial and focussed than its authors generally let on. But books like those, as with Routledge's "National Cinema Series," proceeded from an assumption that it was possible to get a kind of "aerial view" of a national cinema, and that

establishing the broad strokes of those "facts on the ground" served a scholarly purpose. Those kinds of aerial views are all now at least a generation out of date in their particulars, and there is little that has replaced them. I feel much the same about histories of the National Film Board; it is impossible to imagine the 2026 publication of a book that did what Gary Evans' *In the National Interest* did for me as a *doctorant*,[11] or what D.B. Jones's *Movies and Memoranda* had done for my professors:[12] enable us to dig into the specifics of Canadian and Quebec documentary with solid and dependable (yes, partial; yes, incomplete; yes, imperfect) histories that served as an indispensable base. I do hope that such a broader, probably more descriptive and so yes indeed more traditional treatment of the new generation of Quebec cinema is out there on the horizon somewhere. But I doubt it is. Thus, I can only end by reaffirming my tremendous respect for this argument of Ransom's that I disagree with, but also by quoting the late and great Perrault: "Je ne crois pas que le public du cinéma-cinéma parvienne jamais à faire un pays."[13]

Biography

Jerry White is Professor of English at the University of Saskatchewan. In winter term 2026 he was Professeur invité at Université Laval, Département de littérature, théâtre et cinéma, where he taught a course called "Le Groupe Perrault: le Québec, le Canada, le Nunavut, l'Irlande, la Catalogne, la Suisse." His most recent books are *It's Nation Time: A Progressive Defence* (Montréal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024) and (co-edited with Toner Quinn) *The Radical Thinking of Desmond Fennell* (An Spidéal [Ireland]: Boluisce Press, 2025).

Notes

1. Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt, ed., *Quebec Cinema in the 21st Century: Transcending the National* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2024).
2. Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
3. Yves Lever, *Histoire générale du cinéma au Québec*, new revised and expanded edition (Montréal: Boréal, 1995).
4. Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, x.
5. Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, x–xi.
6. See, for instance, Steve Gravestock, *A History of Icelandic Film* (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 2019), which engages in some way with literally every film made in Iceland from the 1890s to 2018.

7. For two enlightening recent interviews, see Michel Coulombe, "Entretien Marie-Hélène Cousineau, productrice et réalisatrice. D'Igloolik à *Mission Impossible*," *Ciné-Bulles* 43.4 (fall 2025): 30–35; and Karine Bertrand, "An Interview with Marie-Hélène Cousineau on the Arnait Trilogy," Gott and Schlit, *Quebec Cinema in the 21st Century*, 299–304. Cousineau acted as Igloolik Isuma's southern representative, so much so that the catalogue programme for the 1993 Festival international du nouveau cinéma et de la vidéo de Montréal gave the print source for Kunuk's 30-minute video *Saputi* as "Igloolik Isuma Prod., 4578 rue Esplanade, Montreal, Qc H2T 2Y5.
8. Jerry White, "Pierre Falardeau and Michel Brault, the FLQ and the Patriotes: Hollywood vs. Modernism," *Québec Studies* no. 37 (spring/summer 2004): 45–61.
9. Joseph I. Donahue, *Essays on Quebec Cinema* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1991).
10. Janis Pallister *The Cinema of Quebec: Masters in Their Own House* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995).
11. Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).
12. D.B. Jones, *Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretative History of the National Film Board of Canada* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1981).
13. Guy Gauthier and Louis Marcorelles, "De la Bretagne au Québec," *La Revue du cinéma* no. 26 (January 1972): 59.