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POPULAR GENRES IN QUEBEC CINEMA

*The Strange Case of Horror
in Film and Television*

Over the last several years, a number of French Canadian filmmakers have distanced themselves from the two dominant axes of Quebec cinema—realism and auteurism—and have asserted their intention to make popular genre films.¹ Genres are not new in Quebec. In fact, there have been genre films made in French Canada for sixty years. Melodramas, such as *La petite Aurore, l'enfant martyre* (1951, Jean-Yves Bigras), dominated the industry in the 1940s and 50s, and light comedies have been a staple of Quebec cinema and television since the 1960s. The change that has marked the last decade is thus not the emergence of genre films *per se*, but rather the increased diversification of genres. Crime thrillers, historical epics, children's movies, and even science fiction films, all relatively rare in the canon, up until recently, have now become common.

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The genre whose presence has most drastically increased in Quebec cinema over the last decade is horror. There are doubtless industrial and commercial reasons for the sudden emergence of horror in Quebec film and television, but as this essay will argue the recent production of French Canadian scary movies and TV shows also reflects an important shift in Québécois culture. While in many ways Quebec remains a largely homogeneous society, there are clear signs that the once seemingly unified French Canadian nation has now become more fragmented and divided. It is no coincidence, I contend, that this growing sense of cultural disintegration has found expression in a popular genre that thrives on displaying the dismemberment of the unified body: horror.

Popular Film and Television in Quebec

The roots of the genre “boom” in Quebec can probably be dated to the mid-1980s, when changes in funding policies, epitomized by the creation of Telefilm Canada in 1984, started putting greater emphasis on commercial viability. A succession of big hits in the 1980s and 1990s, primarily broad comedies like *Cruising Bar* (Robert Morin, 1989), *Ding et Dong, le film* (Alain Chartrand, 1990), *La Florida* (George Mihalka, 1993), and Louis Saia’s *Les Boys* series (1997–2006), demonstrated that Quebeckers would gladly go see homemade films if they could provide entertainment similar to Hollywood movies. The success enjoyed by comedies inspired filmmakers to move increasingly towards other genres. Jean-Marc Vallée’s crime thriller *Liste noire* (1995) was the first non-comedy genre film of the period to make over one million dollars;² it triggered the diversity that we now see in Quebec. Homemade genre films like the melodrama *Séraphin: un homme et son péché* (Charles Binamé, 2002) and the bilingual cop action/comedy *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* (Eric Canuel, 2006) have broken box office records at home. They are not only successful as “Quebec movies.” They have also become some of the top-grossing films in Quebec regardless of origin.

Along with the diversification of genres on the big screen, primetime television in Quebec has also changed since the 1990s. The typical *téléromans* of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, such as *Rue des pignons* (1966–1977) and *Le Temps d’une paix* (1980–1986), were realist chronicles of the mundane existence of ordinary French Canadians. But over the last twenty years, television series have broadened their themes and styles. They now display more sensationalist stories and do not shy

away from sex and violence. The content and form of sleek, high-production-value television series made in Quebec since the 1990s, like the alluring excitement of newsroom intrigues in *Scoop* (1991–1995) and the spectacular brutality of Montreal’s underworld in *Omertà* (1996–1999), are drastically different from the low-budget, low-key, low-resolution shows produced in earlier decades. Yet, French Canadian audiences have effortlessly adapted to the new trends. On any given week, almost two million Quebeckers would gather to watch the glossy mobster show *Omertà* or the intricate psychological thriller *Fortier* (2000–2004).³

The popularity of Quebec genre films and television *in Quebec* is the most obvious manifestation of the differences between English Canadian cinema and the Quebec film industry. French Canada’s linguistic marginality within North America has in some ways been isolating and disenfranchising. But this sense of isolation has also encouraged the development of strong cultural industries to appeal to local audiences. Over time, an effervescent, homemade popular culture has emerged. Today Quebec has a genuine star system, complete with epic tales of rags to riches and lurid accounts of scandalous excesses filling the pages of French-language tabloids. There simply isn’t an equivalent in Anglophone Canada, at least in terms of film and television (the popular music scene is a different story altogether). While French-language films produced in Quebec appeal to a very large percentage of the francophone public, movies made in other Canadian provinces continue to reach only a very small portion of the population.

To be fair, English Canadian television has been more successful in appealing to Canadians than cinema. But even if English Canadian television has enjoyed some hits like *Corner Gas* (2004–2009) that have managed to reach up to two million viewers weekly,⁴ such numbers are proportionally much smaller than comparable hits on Quebec television. English Canada has more than three times the population of French Canada, thus the two million viewers of *Corner Gas* are much less impressive than the two million viewers of *Fortier*, to say nothing of the three to four million viewers who regularly watched the most successful sitcom in Quebec television history, *La petite vie* (1993–1998).⁵

As film historian Pierre Véronneau has noted, “since 2000, Quebec cinema seems to have reached a certain equilibrium, where *auteur* films can thrive alongside commercially successful genre movies, with homemade productions earning over 20 percent of the box office in Quebec, and reaching an extraordinary 26 percent in 2005 (few countries in the world ever manage to do better than this

against the global Hollywood steamroller).”⁶ While Quebec cinema consistently attracts sizable audiences in the province, Canadian cinema has been stagnant over the last decade.⁷ English Canadian audiences watch almost exclusively Hollywood films, and English Canadian film crews work primarily on the type of Hollywood runaway productions that Toby Miller discusses briefly in his contribution to this volume. Miller rightly points out that in 2000 Toronto saw more foreign than local production. Conversely, the Quebec film industry continues to produce a healthy number of indigenous features that include both art films and popular genre movies. This diversification of output has allowed Quebec cinema to enjoy its current success. And perhaps the most telling example of this is the emergence of horror as a viable genre.

To my knowledge, prior to the 1990s, there had been only *one* French-language horror film produced in Quebec⁸: Jean Beaudin’s *Le Diable est parmi nous* from 1972. Thirty years later, Beaudin returned to the genre with *Le Collectionneur* (2002), a psycho-killer tale of terror based on Chrystine Brouillet’s popular novel. *Le Collectionneur* is among a growing number of films whose main purpose is to scare and disturb their audience. The emergence of horror, a genre that, unlike comedy, has a relatively limited target audience (some people will never go see a horror film!), is the best sign of a national cinema that has great confidence in its own popularity. The production of speciality genres like horror suggests that Quebec cinema believes in its ability to survive the fragmentation of spectatorship.

Recent scary movies like *Le Collectionneur*, *Sur le seuil* (2003, Éric Tessier), *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damés* (2005, Robin Aubert), *La Peau blanche* (2004, Daniel Roby) and *5150, Rue des Ormes* (2009, Éric Tessier) clearly borrow conventions from Hollywood. Psycho killers, Satanists, mad scientists, witches, and man-eating monsters are all typical characters of the American horror film that have now found their way into Quebec cinema. French Canadian horror films, however, retain distinctive characteristics that make them undeniably *Québécois*. The same can be said of television. *Grande Ourse* (2003, Patrice Sauvé) and its sequel *L’Héritière de Grande Ourse* (2005, Patrice Sauvé) are among the first Quebec television series to include elements of mystery and horror. Like horror films, horror television series recycle conventions from other traditions while managing to offer an innovative take on distinct cultural issues.

The main cultural issue that Quebec horror explores on both the big screen and the small screen is the dichotomy between urban modernity and rural

traditionalism in French Canada. As we shall see below, through its excessive, Manichean mode of address, horror expresses the growing concern around the perceived fragmentation of national homogeneity in the province. As Montreal's dominant urbanism disengages itself increasingly from traditional French Canadian values, the rest of the province seems to recede deeper into the dark corners of *passéisme*. 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," then normality in these recent Quebec tales of terror is urban culture and the monster is rural primitivism.⁹

The Urban and the Rural in Quebec Culture

Urbanization in Quebec was slow in the first half of the twentieth century, with the 1930s even witnessing something of a return to the land as a reaction against rampant unemployment in the cities. Unlike in Ontario, where urban growth was more sustained and diversified, urbanization in Quebec before World War II was often stagnant and limited almost exclusively to the island of Montreal.¹⁰ Urban development increased drastically after the war, and by the 1960s, urban culture had become the dominant ethos of the province.¹¹ However, the rural and the land have continued to occupy a central place in the French Canadian imagination. As Gillian Helfield explains in her article, "Cultivateurs d'images: Albert Tessier and the Rural Tradition in Québécois cinema," the idea of the peaceful countryside as the space where the essence of Québécois identity resides remains a common trope, appearing not only in films throughout the history of Quebec cinema but also in other social spheres. For instance, the 1995 Preamble to Bill 1, tabled by the Parti Québécois government to map out the geography of an eventual independent Quebec, "encapsulated mythic constructions of Québécois identity [appropriating] images, traditions, and values rooted in the land. The Preamble also suggested that the Québécois nation is still concretely rooted in the land."¹² For separatists, as well as many other Quebecers, the city might be where a majority of the population lives, but the *real* Québécois belongs in the countryside. This is the ideology that the Catholic Church promoted for decades before the 1960s wave of modernization and secularization known as the Quiet Revolution.¹³ In spite of the profound changes that Quebec

society has undergone since 1960, this traditional perspective still lingers today under different guises.

Like other cultural practices, cinema and television have tended to conceive the imaginary geography of Quebec in binary terms, with the countryside as the cradle of French Canadian culture in contrast to the city as a space where the old stock or *pure laine* Québécois risks being subjected to negative foreign influences, especially *Anglophone* influences. The reality is, obviously, more complex than that. Suburbia represents a third space that is arguably as different from the big city as it is from rural areas. In fact, in the 1960s and 70s the population of core cities declined while that of the suburbs increased.¹⁴ But cinema and television have generally ignored this complex dynamic, and have assigned specific and rather static meanings to each of these three spaces. Urban and rural areas—where, as Bill Marshal has noted, most Quebec films are set¹⁵—work as a dyad embodying two versions of Quebec culture: the modern and the traditional.

Suburbia, for its part, stands alone as the incarnation of an Americanized middle-class middle ground. It is neither thrillingly progressive like the city nor nostalgically reassuring like the countryside. Instead, it is typified by characterless houses on interchangeable streets, peopled by comfortably mediocre nobodies wallowing in their own *kétainerie* (tackiness). There are historical reasons for this association of the suburb with the more boring elements of American culture. As Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard point out, the new urbanism of the 1950s followed an American model, which favoured mass movement from the city to the suburbs.¹⁶ This model fostered the geographical shift of downtowns, away from the earlier spaces of burgeoning modernity towards the passive sites of late capitalist consumption. In the process, it broke the distinction between Montreal, as a literal *island* of urbanity, and the rest of the province as an essentially rural territory. The very emergence of the suburb as this liminal space, where the urban amalgamates the rural in often-dissonant ways, is thus an American idea superimposed upon a visually denatured Quebec landscape. Not surprisingly, films ranging from Pierre Falardeau's *Elvis Gratton, le King des Kings* (1985) to Robert Morin's *Que dieu bénisse l'Amérique* (2006) present suburbia as a space of disengaged artifice, where the adornments of the American way of life hide the barren desolation of French Canadian existence uprooted from its ancestral cultural space.

The two other spaces, the urban and the rural, tend to work in heterotopic relation with one other. Heterotopia, says Foucault, is neither a utopia nor a dystopia, for the heterotopia does exist at least at some level. To quote Foucault: “the heterotopia is simultaneously a mythic and a real contestation of the space in which *we* live.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ The analogy of the mirror is relevant here because the heterotopic correlation between the city and the countryside within the cinematic context is very much based on a visual distinction. As sociologist Bruno Jean writes in his book *Territoires d’avenir: Pour une sociologie de la ruralité* (1997), while there may or may not be drastic social or cultural differences between urbanites and country folk, the specific morphology of the rural landscape remains strikingly distinct, *visually*, from the cityscape.¹⁹ Unlike suburbia, which looks at once *like* and *unlike* the city, the rural offers a visually recognizable heterotopia that can be used to comment on the city—to hold the mirror up to urban nature, as it were.

Historically, the rural space has been constructed cinematically, in films like Gilles Groulx’s 1964 *Le Chat dans le sac* and Gilles Carle’s 1972 *La vraie nature de Bernadette*, as well as in television series like *Terre humaine* (1978–1984) and *Le Temps d’une paix* (1980–1986), as the repository of the *fundamental* values of Quebec culture; where the *real* Quebec is located. When the alienated urbanite goes back to the country it is to rediscover the values—embodied visually in trees and lakes and snow—that s/he has lost somewhere along the way through overexposure to the busy streets, noisy bars, inhuman office towers, and foreign influences of the city. Quebec’s only French language horror film of the 1970s, *Le Diable est parmi nous*, conveys exactly this message, albeit through the excessive mode typical of the genre. In this film, mysterious exotic *objets d’arts* are instrumental in turning a group of Montrealers into devil worshippers. While the film ends on the pessimistic note that the devil walks “among us” (“parmi nous”) in the streets of the big city, the film offers a brief escape from this threat when, halfway through the narrative, the main character (Daniel Pilon) and his girlfriend (Louise Marleau) drive away from the urban nightmare to a small village where they can enjoy, however briefly, a return to pastoral peacefulness.

As mentioned above, this conception of a peaceful rural space as the locus of authentic “French-Canadianness” away from metropolitan corruption has not

only appeared in Quebec film and television. In very concrete ways, the rural has been constructed within Quebec culture as a solid anchor, secured deep under the surface, in staunch resistance against the foreign influences that threaten *pure laine* Québécois identity. Perhaps more than anything else, the Francophone countryside has been—and in some ways continues to be—perceived as a linguistic sanctuary away from the English-Canadian population that thrives in Montreal. In his book *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, Richard Handler discusses various programs devised by the Quebec government in the 1960s and 70s to promote an appreciation of the Québécois's Francophone heritage or *patrimoine*. One such program was “Vacances-Familles,” initiated in 1971, which arranged for urbanites to spend time with rural families.²⁰ “Organizations like Vacances-Familles,” writes Handler, “direct city dwellers to country folk, middle-class white-collar families to small farmers, intellectuals to ‘natural’ Québécois. It caters to those in search of their roots, or those who want their children to experience country life as they imagine their grandparents had experienced it.”²¹ Relating his own experiences with Vacances-Familles, Handler adds that the host families were “certainly aware that tourists interpret their lives as folkloric manifestations of true Québécois culture, yet they did not generally rearrange their routines in order to demonstrate their authenticity or to treat [tourists] to the folklore [they] had come to see.”²² Such initiatives were thus clearly aimed at “locating the popular” within the context of a rural folk culture that was deemed to have resisted the gravitational pull of the cosmopolitan, Anglophile urban centre.

This search for roots still exists today²³ and can be seen in more recent films like Denys Arcand's *L'Âge des ténèbres* (2007) and Jean-François Pouliot's *La Grande Séduction* (2003). In the former, a jaded, demoralised civil servant finds solace in a natural landscape away from the chaos and meaninglessness of his urban existence. In the latter, a coke-snorting, jazz-listening plastic surgeon finds the true meaning of life in a remote village where he replaces his scalpel for a fishing rod. But while recent art films like *L'Âge des ténèbres* still tend to draw an aesthetically pleasing, impressionistic picture of the country as a site of redemption for the misguided urbanite, recent horror films and television adopt quite a different perspective. Indeed, in recent horror films, the rural as a peaceful site of nationalist rejuvenation has been completely transformed into a *locus horribilis*, where picturesque local colours disappear behind Satanism, witchcraft, torture, and gruesome murders. While the depiction of rural areas as terrifying places is

certainly not new in horror films from Hollywood and elsewhere—one only needs to think of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Wicker Man* (1973)—it *is new* in Quebec cinema.

The Rural as Quebec's New *Locus Horribilis*

For the longest time, the urban–rural split was veiled by the myth of the “unified nation,” whereby *all* old-stock Québécois were deemed to be fundamentally similar, with the urbanites being somewhat more distanced from their true “rural” origins, having been corrupted by English-Canadian power. Early in Michel Brault’s 1974 masterpiece *Les Ordres*, a dejected working-class character (Jean Lapointe) living a miserable urban existence states: “I was born on a farm like my wife, Marie. I guess our biggest mistake was coming to the city.” This line sums up the nationalist myth of French-speaking Montrealers who long to return to the farm and rejoin their Québécois brethren. In recent years, however, drastically divergent ideological positions between the city and the countryside have started to erode this idea of a homogeneous nation belonging in the countryside. Increasingly, the country is perceived by urbanites as conservative, insular, and sometimes downright backward. The results of the March 2007 election in Quebec made manifest this cultural divide. The tremendous gains made by Mario Dumont’s right wing, anti-immigration *Action Démocratique du Québec* outside Montreal exposed the dialectic between urban liberalism and rural conservatism. In 2006, a small village, Hérouxville, had proposed ultra-conservative bylaws meant to prohibit certain practices associated with Islamic fundamentalism. While most urban politicians criticized this proposal for its blatant racism, Dumont spoke out in favour of the proposed rules. The remarkable surge of popularity of the ADQ in rural areas in the months leading up to the 2007 election attested that Dumont’s assertion of the need to defend Quebec’s traditional values struck a chord with a large portion of the population outside the metropolis.²⁴ Significantly, by the end of 2008, when the Hérouxville affair had died down and other issues were dominating the headlines, the ADQ had already lost much of its support even outside Montréal.²⁵ Clearly, this one-platform party could not thrive without exploiting rural racist sentiments, which had reached their apex in 2006–2007.

A 2007 series of public consultations on “reasonable accommodations” for immigrants—known as the Bouchard–Taylor Commission²⁶—further exposed

the division between Montreal and the countryside. While in remote areas such as Saguenay, prejudices against ethnic and religious minorities were clearly expressed, in Montreal participants to various forums, especially young people, appeared to embrace the ideal of multicultural interaction.²⁷ The most notorious participant in the consultation was probably Saguenay's mayor Jacques Tremblay, who insisted that Quebec is foremost a Catholic nation and that French Canadians are entitled to impose their religious values on others. The response from many Montrealers was one of bewildered disbelief before Tremblay's small-town narrow-mindedness. Representative of this petrified astonishment on the part of urbanites was an article by François Parenteau in the hip, urban weekly *Voir*. For Parenteau, Jacques Tremblay's presentation to the Bouchard–Taylor Commission was comparable to a “Taliban speech, spoken by a hillbilly priest who wants to drag us back to a pre-Quiet Revolution time of benedictions at the lumberjack camp.”²⁸ For Parenteau and other urbanites, such as well-known intellectual Denise Bombardier, the Bouchard–Taylor Commission was a useful exercise to reveal the “raw truth” of Quebec culture in all its ugliness, rage, and hatred.²⁹

The Bouchard–Taylor Commission, along with the 2007 provincial election, made evident the chiasm between Montreal's laic multiculturalism and the conservatism and religiosity of country folk.³⁰ It would obviously be a gross exaggeration to claim that every Montrealer now perceives the rest of Quebec as a hotbed of hillbilly religious fundamentalism. But there is no doubt that the gulf between urban cosmopolitanism and rural conservatism has become increasingly apparent. I would argue that the urbanite's current perception of the countryside as a site of radical religious conservatism has found a most striking expression in recent Quebec horror films and television shows. Within the horror idiom of *Sur le seuil*, *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damés* and the *Grande Ourse* series, this takes the form of a binary opposition between savage, pagan rituals and urban scientific/technological rationalism. The way in which these works tackle the dichotomy must have also struck a chord with French Canadian spectators, since hundreds of thousands flocked to theatres to see the films or sat before their televisions to watch the series.³¹

Sur le seuil, *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damés*, and *Grande Ourse*

Sur le seuil is the most obvious example of a narrative that sees the rural as the site of primitive beliefs and arcane superstitions. Based on a novel by Patrick Senécal,

Sur le seuil tells the story of a psychiatrist named Paul Lacasse (Michel Coté) who must take care of new patient Thomas Roy (Patrick Huard), a horror novelist who has purposefully cut off his fingers before trying to commit suicide. A cynical, middle-aged physician who thinks 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 far 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 close 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 fetus from her womb. Paul and the police arrive just in 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, 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*.³² 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 âgés 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.³³

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 condition. Only when faced with the other space of primitive beliefs does he contemplate, 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-worshippers clashes 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 the other space of perverse religiosity 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 ?³⁴

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.³⁵ 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.

Sur le seuil clearly manifests a newly acknowledged reality in Quebec; that is, that the “nation” is fragmented; split in two. On the one hand, the modern city that constantly tries to claim its place on the world stage,³⁶ and on the other hand, a rural Quebec that votes for the ADQ and is obsessed with people who worship weird gods and turn good old Catholic values upside down. The “cognitive dissonance” suffered by Paul Lacasse mirrors the bewilderment experienced by urbanites before the radical conservatism of country folk.

Saints-Martyrs-des-Damés and the *Grande Ourse* series³⁷ add another spin to the urban-rural dichotomy, namely, the appropriation, transformation and “perversion” of urban technology by the country folk. In both narratives, an urban journalist is sent to investigate the peculiarities of a remote village. Unlike in *Sur le Seuil*, where the rural threat is wholeheartedly supernatural, in *Saints-Martyrs* and *Grande Ourse* seemingly inexplicable events are eventually explained as the result of misguided scientists using technology for their malevolent purposes. In the former, a tabloid journalist, Flavien (François Chénier), goes to the remote village of Saints-Martyrs to report on strange disappearances. As his investigation unfolds, Flavien has disturbing visions filled with images of evil twins, a ghostly bride, a bloody groom, and a sinister man in a sombre suit. It turns out that a mad scientist named Dr. Faustin (Hubert Loiselle) is responsible for the disappearances. He kidnapped and killed people to create babies from the life juices of the dead. The twist is that Faustin used his methods to create male babies in his own image and female ones in the image of his mother. The crux of the drama results from one of his own clones marrying one of his mother’s clones. The idea that his creatures’ sexual relations amounted to his having intercourse with his own mother pushed him over the edge and made him kill his most beautiful creation—the bride that haunts Flavien’s nightmares. When Flavien realizes that he too is one of Faustin’s creatures, he kills his “father” to put an end to the cycle of narcissistic, incestuous self-reproduction.

The significance of this plot as a representation of how Quebec spectators perceive themselves emerges from the overlap of urban technology and a stereotypically rural proclivity for incest. Much of Quebec literature, especially by women, has focused on “hallucinatory tale[s] of jealousy, hatred, mutilation and incest set in . . . rural Quebec,” to paraphrase Margaret Atwood’s description of Marie-Claire Blais’s debut novel, *La Belle Bête* (1959).³⁸ The new spin on traditional gothic stories of incest set in backward French Canada is that nowadays,

new technologies have found their way to the deepest recess of rural Quebec, but only to reassert traditional practices.

In his study on rurality, Bruno Jean argues that new technologies tend to be acquired at a quicker rate in Quebec's rural areas than in the cities. But according to Jean's analysis, the phenomenon does not merely reflect the rural population's desire to emulate urbanites. Rather, Jean argues that the specific rural utilization of technologies allow people living away from large centres to "mark their difference and their identity."³⁹ Rural populations consciously relate to technology in a way that asserts their distinct rapport with urban innovations. *Saints-Martyrs* thus mirrors a particular tendency of rural Quebec cultures that appropriate modern technologies, paradoxically enough, to affirm traditional identities. Of course, the technologies that Jean talks about have nothing to do with evil baby-making machines. But as is always the case within the excessive mode of horror, actual practices are exaggerated and distorted to the point of monstrosity to make an unmistakable point about the real atrocities that lie beneath the thin veneer of seemingly inoffensive, everyday life.

The technology that Jean is most interested in is television. He argues that when people from Gaspésie or other remote regions watch shows produced in Montreal, they do not fashion themselves after what they see, but rather apprehend the audiovisual material they witness as a spectacle of otherness.⁴⁰ Interestingly, television as a medium of otherness is at the centre of the last work I want to discuss, *Grande Ourse*.

Grande Ourse's narrative is more intricate than those of *Saints-Martyrs* and *Sur le seuil*—and in fact certain critics have praised Quebec television spectators for their willingness to meet the challenge presented by the show's convoluted plot.⁴¹ Of course, the ten one-hour episodes of the series allow for more protagonists and subplots than the 90-minute format of the feature film. But beyond that, the core narrative of the series is also more complex, in and of itself, than that of *Saints-Martyrs*. Most importantly, *Grand Ourse* does not entirely explain away the mystery through the figure of the mad scientist. In the series, a jaded, alcoholic, heart-broken media personality whose career is in decline, Louis-Bernard Lapointe (Marc Messier), is sent to a small village, accessible only by plane, to explore the unique character of Grande Ourse. Shortly after arriving in the forlorn mining town, Lapointe meets an enigmatic woman, a local witch called Blanche Von Trieck (Élise Guilbault). Blanche informs him that he is the "messenger" who

heralds her death and the beginning of the next generation of witches—the thirteenth generation of evil witches.

Through the rest of the series, Lapointe investigates the weird appearances of individual villagers on the local television station, as they publicly reveal deeply hidden secrets to their stunned friends and neighbours. For most of the series, we are led to believe that the bizarre televised confessions are generated by Blanche-the-Witch, who uses her supernatural powers to project images of the villagers' tormented souls onto TV screens. As such, the series initially appears to replicate horror films like *Poltergeist* (1982), in which television as a technological medium is transformed into a spiritualist medium. But Lapointe's investigation does not support this hypothesis. As the series reaches its climax, we are nowhere closer to an understanding of the witch and her followers than in the first episode. Rather the series' "big reveal" has to do with a classified research project and a female scientist, named Catherine (Anne Dorval), with whom Lapointe is in love. As *Grande Ourse* ends, we discover that Catherine has been using awkwardly antiquated neurological technology to expose, through TV pyrotechnics like fast editing and static effects, the hypocrisy of villagers who use and abuse one another. As such, the series gives radicalized form to the rural appropriation of television, which shows the true identity of the villagers through spectacle.

But at the same time as a scientific explanation is provided, the witchcraft narrative is not negated or resolved. Although she dies early in the series, Blanche-the-Witch continues to appear throughout the narrative. Most significantly, she appears as a bear—thus revealing the true meaning of the "big bear" of the title—at the end of the show when her followers ritualistically burn her body. Furthermore, while most strange occurrences are explained in the end, the series both opens and concludes on a gathering of creepy children who, we are led to believe, are the new generation of witches, but whose narrative function is never fully accounted for. The mad-scientist plotline thus appears as a superficial distraction that veils the much more mysterious and unknowable story of the witches of Grande Ourse. This mystery remains ultimately unresolved at the end of the series. What matters to me in this complicated storyline is that the series depicts the rural population as one that might appear to be modern in its use of technology, but which remains fundamentally anchored in traditional, primitive beliefs and practices that the urbanite cannot comprehend.

For the sequel of *Grande Ourse*, entitled *L'Héritière de Grande Ourse*, the action unfolding five years after the first series is set in a suburb rather than in an isolated village. While much of the mixture of witchcraft and technology remains central, the narrative becomes less compelling. In fact, weekly viewership declined drastically in the course of the sequel's broadcast. The previous success of *Grande Ourse* attracted 1.1 million viewers for the first episode of the sequel. But by the final episode, ten weeks later, viewership had dropped by 400,000.⁴² While there are probably other reasons for the mitigated success of the *L'Héritière*, I would argue that locating the action in the third space of suburbia diminished the horror effect of the series and, in the process, made it more a parody than a serious "série fantastique." While there is nothing wrong with generic hybridity, and the original series already included much humour, the tacky suburban setting emptied the series of its dark, menacing elements and transformed it into a light-hearted mockery of itself. This, I would argue, was a central reason for spectators' decreased interest. As mentioned earlier, suburbia lends itself less to gothic tales of terror than to parodic reflections on a made-in-Quebec American dream. The rural, on the other hand, is the perfect space to generate horrifying depictions of the French Canadian nightmare, namely, the ungodly return of repressed superstitions and perverse religiosity in reaction against the normalization of the multi-ethnic complexion of the province's main urban centre.

The recent proliferation of horror in Quebec film and television⁴³ coincides with an increased impression amongst the population that the nation is divided between urban cosmopolitan modernity and rural nationalist traditionalism. I would certainly not want to make the universal claim that there always exists a correlation between the disintegration of nationalist homogeneity and the rise of horror. But in the particular circumstances of Quebec in the early twenty-first century, horror seems to have emerged as an ideal mode to give form to this sense of social fracture, disintegration, and collapse. The strange case of horror in Quebec cinema thus bespeaks of a unique conjuncture in French Canadian culture when a screeching tear in the fabric of the nation finds expression in a popular genre that is wholly dedicated to the radical dismemberment of the unified body: the sparagmos.⁴⁴ Horror will thrive on Quebec screens as long as the current situation persists; it will fade away only when, or if, the nation awakes from its collective nightmare.

Notes

1. On the subject of genres in recent Quebec cinema, see Pierre Véronneau, "Genres and Variations: The Audiences of Quebec Cinema," in *Self-Portraits: The Cinemas of Canada since Telefilm*, eds. André Loiselle and Tom McSorley (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 2006): 93–127.
2. "Appendix," *Self-Portraits*, 323.
3. Louise Cousineau, "Omertà mène le peloton, La Petite Vie numéro 2," *La Presse*, 16 September 1997: C13; Louise Cousineau, "Fortier 2: meilleur que le premier en tous points," *La Presse*, 2 February 2001: C4.
4. Tim Arseneault, "Guide a real gas," *Chronicle-Herald*, 9 December 2006: C10.
5. See André Loiselle, "A Small Life for the Small Screen: On the Cultural Phenomenon of the Sitcom *La petite vie* and the Critical Failure of the Feature *Ding et Dong, le film*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 15:1 (Spring 2006): 8–27.
6. Véronneau 2006, 117.
7. Kate Taylor, "Quebec's up. English Canada? Never Mind," *Globe and Mail*, 30 December 2005: R3.
8. Although Montreal-made horror movies like *The Playgirl Killer* (1968) and *The Pyx* (1973) include a few snippets of French, they remain English-language films.
9. Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." In *The American Nightmare*, eds. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979): 14.
10. Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard, *Histoire du Québec contemporain: Le Québec depuis 1930, tome II* (Montreal: Boréal, 1989): 55–59.
11. *Ibid*, 277, 535.
12. Gillian Helfield, "Cultivateurs d'images: Albert Tessier and the Rural Tradition in Québécois cinema," *Representing the Rural: Space, Place, and Identity in Films about the Land*, eds. Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006): 61.
13. Linteau et al., 1989, 309–310.
14. Linteau et al., 1989, 539–540.
15. Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001): 307.
16. Linteau et al., 1989, 540–541.
17. Michel Foucault, "Des Espace Autres," *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, October 1984; English version: "Text/Context of Other Space" *Diacritics* 16:1 (1986): 23.
18. *Ibid*, 23–24.
19. Bruno Jean, *Territoires d'avenir: Pour une sociologie de la ruralité* (Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1997): 17.

20. See Bruno Roy, “15 ans d’accessibilité pour tous, 1971–1986, *Vacances-familles inc.* (Sainte-Foy: Vacances-famille, 1986).
21. Richard Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988): 52.
22. *Ibid.*, 53.
23. See my analysis of Quebec culture’s current “nostalgia and search for origins” in *Cinema as History: Michel Brault and Modern Quebec* (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 2007): 153–177.
24. See for instance Hélène Baril, “Élections 2007: Le Choix des Québécois—Montréal sous le choc,” *La Presse* 27 March 2007: A34; Mario Girard, “Élections 2007: Le Choix des Québécois—Circonscriptions montréalaises, les adéquistes visent la prochaine fois,” *La Presse* 27 March 2007: A34; Ariane Lacoursière, “Mario Dumont comprend Hérouxville,” *La Presse*, 4 February 2007: A8.
25. “L’ADQ moribonde, Mario Dumont abandonne,” *Le Devoir*, 9 December 2008: A3.
26. The commission was headed by Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor.
27. Marie-Andrée Chouinard, “L’épreuve du reel,” *Le Devoir*, 30 November 2007: A8.
28. This is a rough translation of Parenteau’s original sentence: “C’est un discours de taliban! Ce bleuét curé voudrait nous ramener avant la révolution tranquille, avec les processions de la Fête-Dieu et les bénédictions de chantiers.” See François Parenteau, “Impertinences: la tribune téléphonique Bouchard–Taylor,” *Voix* 21:39 (27 September 2007): 16.
29. Bombardier’s original sentence: “La vérité toute crue comporte aussi de la laideur, de la hargne, de la rage, voire de la haine.” See Denise Bombardier, “Retour au VIII^e siècle,” *Le Devoir*, 22 September 2007: C5.
30. For comments on the chiasm between Montreal and the regions, see instance, Marie-Ève Mathieu, “La récréation est-elle bientôt finie?” *Le Devoir*, 24 September 2007: A6; Kathleen Lévesque “La Grande ville balkanisée,” *Le Devoir*, 22 September 2007: C1; Sébastien Rodrigue, “Montréal est en plein essor, soutient le maire,” *La Presse*, 21 October 2007: A9. It should be noted that other observers also note a generational chiasm that transcends geographical parameters. See Katia Gagnon, “Les Québécois rejettent tous les accommodements,” *La Presse*, 9 October 2007: A2.
31. *Sur le seuil* made almost \$2 million in theatres, putting it in the top-25 of all time at the Quebec box office (“Appendix,” *Self Portraits*, 322). About one million viewers watched *Grande Ourse* on Radio Canada every week in the winter of 2004. See for instance, Louise Cousineau, “Facteur de risques fait frémir,” *La Presse*, 5 February 2004: A5. In the fall of 2004, *Grande Ourse* also received twelve Gémeaux, Quebec television awards. See Frédérique Boudreault, “Balayage de *Grande Ourse*,” *Le Soleil*, 29 November 2004: B1.
32. This is the term generally used to talk about the period of Quebec history dominated by the Catholic Church and the ultra-conservative government of Maurice

- Duplessis, premier from 1936 to 1959 (with a brief interruption during WWII). The *Grande Noirceur* was followed in 1960 by the Quiet Revolution.
33. Patrick Senécal, *Sur le seuil* (Québec: Les Éditions Alire, 1998): 341.
 34. *Ibid.*, 388.
 35. Torban Grodal, "Crime and Horror Fiction," *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings and Cognition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): 247–249.
 36. For instance, in 2005 Montreal promoted its status as the literary capital of the world. See for example, Chantal Guy, "Montréal, capitale mondiale du livre," *La Presse*, 8 April 2005: AS8.
 37. Similarities between the film and the series have been made in passing but never thoroughly analyzed. See for instance, Kevin Laforest, "Saints-Martyrs-des-Damnés: Village fantôme," *Voix* 19:41, 13 October 2005: 16.
 38. Margaret Atwood, *Second Words* (Toronto: Anansi, 2000): 260. See also Mary Jane Green, *Women and Narrative Identity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) in particular her comments on France Théoret's *Nous parlons comme on écrit* (1982): 100–111.
 39. Jean 1997, 19.
 40. *Ibid.*
 41. Louise Cousineau, "Les Québécois n'ont pas peur de la télé différente," *La Presse*, 6 September 2004: AS4.
 42. See Hugo Dumas, "La SRC n'a pas aimé la sortie de Jean-François Lépine," *La Presse*, 15 March 2005: AS1.
 43. In addition to the titles I have discussed here, there have also been several short horror films produced in Quebec over the last few years. The "Festival SPASM" series, as well as the short films of Izabel Grondin, François Simard, Anouk Whissel, and Jonathan Prévost attest to the current horror trend in the province.
 44. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957): 222.

