INTRODUCTION

The Urban Imaginary in Canadian Cinema

This book is a study of the focus on Canada's urban environments that has emerged in Canadian narrative cinema over the past decades. It draws its inspiration in part from another recent trend, that toward interdisciplinary approaches. In what follows, I seek to integrate insights from three well-established fields—Canadian studies, with its ongoing exploration of national-identity formation for both individuals and collectives; film studies, which contributes concepts of genre, authorship, and audience; and urban studies perspectives on the built environment and the urban experience. Mark Shiel, co-editor of Cinema and the City, argues that interdisciplinary approaches “can be profoundly useful and fruitful in addressing key issues.”1 Ideally, interdisciplinarity creates intellectual linkages that generate fresh approaches to subject matter. Shiel's work, for example, uses interdisciplinary methods to generate what he calls “a sociology of cinema.”2 My goal is different: I want to link the construction of urban identity in a film text with the urban influences on the filmmaker and the film’s audience. Through the integration of theoretical, methodological, and empirical approaches from three different fields, I seek to move the discussion of film and the city beyond the conventional boundaries of any particular field of scholarship. By linking films and cities and analyzing how the two are related, I also hope to offer a distinctive statement about contemporary Canadian identity—to clarify how Canadian urban cinema contributes both to our understanding of urban realities and to our efforts to articulate what it means to be Canadian.

The importance of the urban to recent Canadian cinema begins with the established public discourse on cities such as Toronto or Montréal, which has
long recognized the social and economic vibrancy of those cities and their importance as cultural centres. Historically, these cities have also served as symbols of division—signifiers of opposing political and cultural identities. Nationalist discourse, with its goal of promoting a unified sense of Canadian identity, has accordingly encouraged an emphasis on the rural. A basic premise of this position is that our overall identification with the land unites us into a single nation. This view of national identity, which equates the “country” with countryside, is common to many cultures. For example, the French word *pays*, which appears in the terms *paysage*, “landscape,” and *paysan*, “peasant,” has come to mean “country” in the sense of a nation. In the popular imagination, cities are associated with change, migration, and innovation rather than stability, homogeneity, and tradition. As sources of disruption, cities become symbols of subversion in cultures that seek to promote an essentialized vision of national identity. The view that Paris is not the “true” France, for example, or that London is not the “real” England is thus normative for public mythology in these countries. In his essay “The True North Strong and Free,” Rob Shields points out that, in Canada, the “great national foundational myth” of the North as “an unconquerable wilderness devoid of ‘places’” encouraged the view that the essence of Canadian identity lies in the country’s natural landscape, rather than in the built environment.

Perhaps because national discourses about identity promote a division between the rural and the urban that privileges the former, Canadian urban identity has come to include within itself an attraction to the rural. This attraction, rooted in the obvious absence of the much-lauded rural in Canadian urban environments, is visible in public discourse, which is often laced with disquiet about urban life and identity. I have lived my whole life in Canadian cities, yet, because of the power of the rural myth, I find that urban spaces do not measure up to my inherent sense of Canadianness. When I think of being “Canadian,” I think more of my experience of hiking in the Rocky Mountains or canoeing down a fast-flowing Precambrian Shield river. As an urban dweller, I am divided in my loyalties: the valorization of the nonurban environment has instilled doubts about the ultimate value and authenticity of city life. A question I attempt to answer in this book is how this ambivalence is articulated and interpreted in cinematic images of Canadian cities.
While the rural myth of Canadian national identity ignores the contribution of the urban to that identity, that same urban reality now comprises a diversity of cultures and peoples, a multiplicity of social voices and languages, and a growing sense of transnational and diasporic identities. After the conquest of New France in the eighteenth century, the attempt to promote a monolithic—that is, Anglocentric—reading of Canadian national identity founded on the existence of French Canada. By advancing a geographic, rather than cultural, reading of Canadian identity, the rural myth tried to sidestep the English-French divide. The rural myth emphasizes not only the magnificence of pristine wilderness but also memories of a foundational agrarianism as defining elements of nationality. All of this is wrapped in the Eurocentric (but not necessarily Anglocentric) whiteness of a valorized settler society, whose standard heroes are European or Euro-Canadian explorers—heroes who, while themselves immigrants, were nonetheless white immigrants. Fundamental to this project was a distinction between white and nonwhite, a racism that was first aimed at First Nations but today also finds expression in anti-immigrant opinion. Given that the majority of new Canadians now live in cities, the rural continues to be associated with white settler society (despite the fact that, historically, many newly arrived immigrants lived by farming). This study seeks to understand how contemporary representations of cities and urban life in Canadian cinema reflect the demographic trends of the past forty years and how these representations have contributed to dismantling the overarching narratives of national identity that were forged in an earlier period.

THE NATIONALIST-REALIST PROJECT AND THE DOCUMENTARY

Under the auspices of the National Film Board of Canada and the vision of its founding father, the British documentary filmmaker John Grierson, the documentary tradition became the bedrock of Canadian cinema. This preoccupation with documentary production as the best way of expressing national identity, and thus encouraging patriotic pride, held sway from the time the NFB was founded, in 1939, until the 1970s, when feature film production became more common. In its documentary mode, Canadian cinema embraced a strong sense of place as intrinsic to the definition of Canadian identity. This
sense of place was most commonly evoked through images of the natural landscape—oceans, grasslands, tundra, boreal forests, and mountains, as well as the flora and fauna associated with them. The landscape is also governed by seasons, by the turning of the leaves and snowy winters.

Canadian film scholar Jim Leach calls this orientation toward place in Canadian cinema the “nationalist-realist project.” In nationalist-realist cinema, Canada’s natural landscape is privileged as an abiding way of visualizing national identity. The country’s essence is located in timeless images of unspoiled wilderness and vast, unpopulated spaces, which stand in unspoken contrast to Europe’s relatively confined rural areas and cities crowded with people and densely layered with history. If settler society defined the fledgling Canadian nation in opposition to the Aboriginal population (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) by appropriating “the land,” it also opposed Canada to the European homelands of the founding settlers, establishing a dichotomy between the “old country” and the new land. Canadian nationalism would be best served by an emphasis on its distinct landscape was the response. This approach ended up privileging wilderness as a powerful (though not the sole) component of the distinct landscape. Much of this privileging was rooted in exploration literature, which promoted the concept of an idyllic or sublime wilderness, while ignoring the reality of what colonialism was doing to Native peoples.

The impulse to define Canada in terms of landscape is visible in the paintings of the Group of Seven, whose images of the rugged, barren landscapes of the Precambrian Shield reflected the group’s conviction that a distinctly Canadian form of art rested on the embrace of nature. The lack of a human presence in many of the images encouraged the view that Canadian identity had to be forged from an association with nature and what it implied about human nature. The documentary film tradition was comfortable with this approach because it allowed apparently realistic images to be exploited for their mythologizing potential. In its classical form, the documentary seeks not merely to chronicle its subject but to do so with the appearance of detachment and objectivity. We are encouraged to believe that what we are seeing is “the truth,” as opposed to an interpretation of empirical reality. The documentary thus had an inherent capacity to serve ideological, educational, social, and political functions that made it well suited to the nationalist-realist project.
The NFB, as an agency of the state, eschewed the imaginary fictional film (other than in animation) in order to project a unified, modernist self-image appropriate to nation building.\textsuperscript{6}

W. H. New considers the concept of the land to be “a verbal trope” in Canadian writing, arguing that Canadian culture created a “language of land” and a “reading of land” as the basic ingredients of national identity in both fictional and nonfictional representation.\textsuperscript{7} This position is confirmed by Douglas Ivison and Justin Edwards in \textit{Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities}, when they point out that the urban “has often been elided from our public discourse, our national mythologies, and critical discussions about Canadian literature and culture.”\textsuperscript{8} As they rightly observe, the “privileging of the wilderness and nordicity as defining characteristics of Canadian identity not only fails to recognize the lived experiences of the vast majority of Canadians, but also distances Canadian readers from their literature.”\textsuperscript{9} Margaret Atwood admits, for example, that in her discussion of Canadian literature during her 1991 Clarendon Lectures at Oxford University, she privileged “the North, or the wilderness, or snow, or bears or cannibalism” over “the literature of urban life.” It was much more fun, she says, to talk to the English about how their cultural fantasies of Canada had played out in Canadian literature than to discuss urban life, which they knew so well.\textsuperscript{10}

The nationalist identification with iconic features of landscape and a relatively circumscribed set of nonurban social worlds (the fisherman of the coasts, the grain farmer of the prairies, the British Columbia logger, etc.) results in the marginalization of urban spaces in general and, in particular, a denial of their inherent heterogeneity. The trope of the land casts urban life as an unrelenting monoculture, even though anyone who has lived in Canadian cities knows that this is patently untrue. Nationalist-realist rhetoric portrays the cityscape as a conflicted expression of welcome economic power, on the one hand, and social ills, on the other. It gives the city no moral weight, and it includes no recognition of the diversity in Canadian cities as contributing to the construction of a national identity, given that the differences both among cities and within them would tend to complicate a unified vision of “Canada” as a panorama of landscapes stretching from coast to coast.

If the nationalist-realist project, with its emphasis on the land, seeks to encourage a unified nation-state perspective on Canadian identity, a city-state
perspective instead encourages multiple variations on that identity. The self-referential multiplicity of urban spaces thwarts any attempt at a superficial categorization of cities as uniform. An urban perspective eschews the land in favour of cultural and industrial production, techno-realities, and ethnic and class identities. It is precisely this perspective that began influencing Canadian fictive films of the postmodern era, films that contributed to the diversification of national identity into a plurality of competing voices and imagery. With its focus on urban settings and urban life, recent Canadian cinema has challenged the trope of the land and has offered alternative ways of seeing national identity. In place of the nationalist-realist project of the documentary era, it has adopted an urban imaginary perspective—a term I use to refer to the pivotal position of urban spaces and urban characters in postmodern Canadian feature films and to the way in which Canadian filmmakers have imagined Canadian cities and the people who live and work there. Through the use of visual imagery, soundscapes, storyline, and characters, these filmmakers have created imaginative portraits of urban experience that undermine both documentary realism and the goals of nationalism.

The unravelling of the modernist conception of national identity—that is, the nationalist-realist project—in the postmodern period and its replacement by the urban imaginary is the central subject of this study. Why did this unravelling occur? First, the extensive global migration to Canada in the closing decades of the twentieth century resulted in the growth of a multiracial society that has come to characterize Canada’s major urban centres. Second, the rise of the nationalisms of separatist Québec and of Canada’s First Nations produced counternarratives and counternational identities that demanded to be incorporated into a new, postcolonial sense of Canadian political and cultural identity. These competing voices challenged the Anglo-Canadian hegemonic identity and contributed to a growing postmodern sensibility. Finally, globalization has undermined Canada’s traditional tendency toward insularity. Both the traditional media and the new social media, primarily urban in orientation and keenly conscious of demographics, have encouraged a postnationalist consciousness among younger generations—or, at the very least, a rethinking of the vision of Canadian identity as something monocultural and anchored above all in rural space. At the same time, digital technologies have globalized the workplace, underscoring the links between our neoliberal economy and
capitalist production worldwide and contributing to new sense that Canadians are citizens of the world. Together, these factors have influenced the creation of an urban cinema that is both a more accurate reflection of contemporary Canadian realities and a medium of articulation for the various counternarratives that have irrevocably called into question the older nationalist ideology and its definitions. While modernism grounded its adherents’ secure sense of the future in the illusion of an unchangeable natural past, postmodernism grounds an insecure future in a turbulent, ever-changing present that is all about conflicted beginnings and endings.

THE URBAN IMAGINARY AND THE GARRISON MENTALITY

In part because of its size, Canada was only gradually colonized, over a period of some three centuries. Cities thus came into being in different eras and for different reasons, marking each with a distinctive character. Urban populations had a variety of linguistic, religious, and national roots, and, as trade and commerce evolved, cities came to play differing economic roles. The differences among the country’s cities are recognized in Canadian cinema. Canadian filmmakers generally either identify a Canadian city by its proper name or else reference it through certain distinctive features (of architecture, geography, and so on). Canadian audiences can thus recognize, or at least imagine that they recognize, the location depicted in the film. Canadian filmmakers in turn offer an engagement with Canadian cities that is personal and idiosyncratic and, ultimately, more revelatory of a city’s peculiar character, as refracted through the filmmaker’s experience. This means that the experience of urban space conveyed in the film can be quite different from the experience of other inhabitants of that space. As Allan Siegel rightly claims, every city is multifaceted, encompassing “ideological concepts, economic forces, and social spaces that reflect a diversity of cultural, historical, and geographical markers.” This diversity, in combination with the filmmaker’s powers of imagination, means that a city can be portrayed on the screen in a limitless number of ways.

Despite their social and cultural diversity, Canada’s urban populations share a common root in what might be termed “urban insecurity,” which arises specifically from the mythic ruralization and “wildernization” of national
identity in the modernist era. The great Canadian literary thinker Northrop Frye called this urban insecurity the “garrison mentality.”\textsuperscript{13} In the early centuries of the settlement of Canada, the power of Aboriginal peoples and of the “natural” world was so overwhelming, he argued, that it challenged the viability of colonization and so created a defensive mentality in the settlers. The garrison mentality was characterized by a sense of being besieged by a hostile external environment. Inside the walls, it was safe, but this sense of safety, as Frye noted, had another side to it. Those within the garrison felt trapped, as if they were living in a kind of prison from which they longed to escape. This dualism is captured, for example, in the 1991 film \textit{Black Robe}, based on the novel of the same title by Brian Moore. Set in seventeenth-century New France, the story follows the missionaries and \textit{coureurs de bois} who left the confines of Montréal for the hinterland. Their mission required forsaking the relative comfort of the “garrison” so as to increase its influence, whether through the fur trade or conversion. If the external was potentially dangerous, it was also full of possibility. This sense of conflicted attitudes could be said to underpin our confused sense of how to value the urban.

We might conclude that Canadian filmmakers also suffer from a garrison mentality. The city seldom evokes a sense of freedom or liberation in Canadian cinema. Whether one is viewing Montréal filmmaker Jean-Claude Lauzon’s \textit{Léolo}, with its dark, anguished interiors and tormented souls, or Torontonian Atom Egoyan’s \textit{Exotica}, with its even more intense atmosphere of repression and soulful hunger, one feels besieged, claustrophobic, and unnerved. Entrapment and enclosure are the norm. Because every urban space is similarly claustrophobic and yet differs in its character, each urban space can generate its own specific personality within a common field of insecurity. In the absence of a significant Canadian market for Canadian films, the Canadian audience operates like a void, an unknown wilderness that requires exploration by intrepid filmmakers.

Urban cinematic space as an expression of a garrison mentality mirrors the historic construction of Canadian cities as forts, wooden versions of European walled cities or castles. Whether one is talking about sixteenth-century Montréal or nineteenth-century Calgary, one is dealing with nothing less than a fortress mentality as the defining origin of the Canadian city—an insider-versus-outsider paradigm in which nature, like a femme fatale, is both
beautiful and threatening. Films about city life tend to be more libidinal and confrontational, more imbued with inner conflict, than films that glorify the freedom of the human spirit in the great outdoors. Metaphorically, the North-West Mounted Police sergeant tending a garden or building a shed is a rather unimpressive figure compared to the lone man on horseback silhouetted against the setting sun and surrounded by a magnificent landscape both threatening and enticing.

Curiously, then, the garrison mentality results in the construction of an opposite Other that is simultaneously feared as threatening and embraced as desired—nature romanticized both as terrifying wilderness and as what Victorian explorers termed the “sublime.” This ambivalence, this tension between fear and attraction, is what the Canadian urban consciousness inherited from its origins in the garrison mentality. It was the garrison mentality that produced the binary split of nature into both the demonic and the divine, while at the same time associating safety with entrapment. It constructed a myopic, conflicted universe for the city, opposing it to the “purity” of the open land or wilderness. The artists of the Group of Seven, who lauded Canada’s wilderness, illustrate the contradictory impulses of the garrison mentality: they were city people who left the comforts of urban life to commune with the wilderness during the summer months, but then returned to their homes and to earning their livelihood.

Central Canada’s original fort walls also symbolized victory over the threatening, impenetrable density of forests: the vertical logs of a palisade were meant to be stronger than the living trees they walled out. As a human creation, the city must be more powerful than the inhuman forces that threaten it with destruction. Similarly, the nation must be delineated and enclosed to preserve its sense of integrity, wholeness, and distinctness. If its boundaries are indeterminate, its identity will dissipate. In this reading, identity is not defined positively, in terms of qualities that the members of a group hold in common, but negatively, in terms of the dividing line between self and the Other. A focus on cities, with their inherent differences, reminds us that the self is not one but many, fragmented and conflicted, and thus fractures the illusion of unity.

As constructed by the nationalist-realist paradigm, the rural is also a place of wholesomeness—the fishers of the Maritimes, the farmers and ranchers of the West, the loggers of British Columbia, who breathe fresh air and whose
physical labour leaves them strong and healthy. The city stands at the opposite pole, as an unsavoury place, the site of depravity, criminality, and poverty. Furthermore, given that the geographic location of urban space (that is, non-land) is deemed to be irrelevant (a bus driver in Vancouver is much the same as a bus driver in Halifax, while a Prairie farmer can never be confused with a Maritime fisher), all cities are assumed to be alike. In representing a city in all its specificity, the Canadian urban film undermines what might be called the “urban myth,” the fiction of urban uniformity. In short, the practitioners of the urban imaginary expose the nationalist-realist construction of the Canadian city as an ideological fantasy.

The subversion of the nationalist-realist paradigm of Canadian identity is not difficult in the postmodern era, in which the certainty of singular or grand narratives has dissolved and been replaced with multiple narratives rooted in very specific experiential realities. But to attempt to equate national identity with a variety of urban spaces—that is, to replace the discourse of the nationalist-realist project with one rooted in heterogeneity—is not easy. As Jim Leach points out, given “the complex ways in which films engage with the political, cultural, and mythic dimensions of national life,” film becomes a multifaceted telling. Because the urban imaginary cannot produce a unified discourse about national identity, it has engaged instead in compiling identities, all of which are viewed as having equal value. This storytelling is not an alternate narrative so much as it is a compilation of alternative narratives.

Constructing the Urban Imaginary Project

Two films from the early period of Canadian narrative film, both set in Toronto, have become part of the Canadian canon—Don Owen’s Nobody Waved Goodbye (1964) and Don Shebib’s Goin’ Down the Road (1970). Goin’ Down the Road, in particular, featured the vitality of Toronto in its story of two men from the Maritimes encountering the big city. For the first time, the traditionally staid city of Toronto was portrayed cinematically as a metropolis with nightlife and city blocks filled with flashing neon lights. It was a youthful and energizing image that had once been reserved for metropolitan centres like New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris. In the same year, Claude Jutra produced the
Québec masterpiece *Mon oncle Antoine* (1970), a film that was profoundly rural and nostalgic. Clearly, then, both orientations were present in this late modernist period.

In 1968, the Canadian government at long last created funding for Canadian feature films, through the newly founded Film Development Corporation. This move, which was intended as a statement of cinematic maturity associated with the patriotism of the 1967 centennial celebrations, coincided with the nation’s increased urbanism: by this time almost 75 percent of Canadians were urban dwellers. During the so-called tax shelter era of the late 1970s, many feature films were made in Canada, but few became part of the canon. It was only with the founding of Telefilm Canada in 1982 that a new era really began. A new standard of urban representation was established by Patricia Rozema’s portrayal of urban alienation in Toronto with *I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) and, in Québec, by Denis Arcand’s *Le déclin de l’empire américain* (1986), which was set among the intellectual class in Montréal and won the International Critics Prize at Cannes and a nomination for Best Foreign Film at the Oscars.

In the same decade, sociological changes were transforming major Canadian cities into contemporary expressions of multilingual, multi-ethnic urban culture. This metamorphosis was part of a vast postcolonial transformation of European and North American cities involving tens of millions of migrants, comparable in magnitude to the wave of immigration to North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These changes eventually made their way to the screen. The urban imaginary became the new voice of Canadian cinema, growing in importance as the nationalist-realist project declined, in tandem with the gradually shrinking budgets and diminishing relevance of the NFB.

Unlike contemporary literature, however, which occupies a central position in critical discussions of national culture(s), contemporary Canadian cinema continues to occupy a distinctly peripheral space, for the simple reason that so few Canadians ever see Canadian feature films. This is especially true for English Canadians films, which, for several decades now, have generated a mere 1 to 2 percent of Canadian theatrical box office revenue. Such films are, moreover, generally relegated to the art-house cinema circuit, which exists only in the country’s large metropolitan centers. Although
the situation is better in Québec, the relative invisibility of Canadian cinema, together with the marginalization of urban settings in popular mythology, makes the contribution of urban-themed cinema to national identity more problematic to assess than that of other art forms.18

Undeniably, though, the growth of a feature film industry in Canada allowed directors new scope for creative expression. Canadian narrative film is, on the whole, director driven, more so than mainstream Hollywood film, which is chiefly driven by the box office and relies on a star system to attract viewers. Especially in the case of English Canadian cinema, state-supported production practices have contributed to the valorization of directors. Because so much of Canadian feature film funding is dependent on Telefilm support, and so little of it is tied to who the actors are or to which genre the film belongs, the auteur director is often the film’s major selling feature. If a Canadian audience recognizes anyone in the marketing of a Canadian film, it is most likely the director. This study is influenced by this interpretive framing of Canadian film as director driven. In particular, it seeks to build a direct relationship between the cinematic construction of Canadian urban space and authorship.

The emphasis on authorship and artistic agency is rooted in the concept of the director as auteur, that is, as the person responsible for creating the screenplay and shaping the film in many of its aspects. Theories about the practice of authorship in cinema have moved beyond a simple celebration of the auteur to focus on the complex of influences that create the final work. Roland Barthes’s classic 1968 essay, “The Death of the Author,” challenged European auteur fetishism (the author-god) by moving power to the reader (audience) in relationship to the text (the film). Subsequent studies of the industrial practices of film production revealed not only the multifaceted nature of cinematic authorship, now understood as a collaborative effort of numerous creative talents in scriptwriting, cinematography, editing, and sound, but also the influence of finance (the market) on both the content and process of filmmaking. However, writing at about the same time as Barthes, Peter Wollen defended auteur theory in Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (1969), arguing that the approach was “indispensable” for grasping the artistic strategies at work in a film.19 All those who exercise the power of decision making in relation to a film infuse it with their intentionality, but a director-driven cinema gives more weight to directorial vision, especially when the director also
conceived and wrote the screenplay. When a single individual writes or co-
writes a screenplay, convinces funders of its value, selects and then directs the
actors, and plays other important roles such as producer or editor, then this
agency has to be recognized. Even in films in which directors do nothing more
than direct, there are still personal influences on them that come into play.
Especially given that the filmmakers discussed here are themselves rooted in
the urban realities they depict in their films, it is not unreasonable to consider
the ways in which these films reflect their personal relationship to their cities.
In fact, a number of the films discussed here—notably Robert Lepage’s *Le
Confessionnal* and Guy Maddin’s *My Winnipeg*—are overtly autobiographical or
semi-autobiographical. If we are to understand the representations of cities in
Canadian cinema in all their multiple dimensions, we need to understand the
background of the directors and how their life circumstances may have shaped
their portrayal of an urban life in which they actively participated.

In his discussion of the role of the writer in depicting urban life, Burton
Pike writes that “the process by which the writer evokes the city appears to
parallel the process by which the citizen seeks to encompass his experience
of it.”20 This suggests that a filmmaker’s evocation of a city will resonate more
deeply with someone who has actually lived in the city. There is a correlation
between the process of creation and the process of reception. A viewer who
watches a story set in his or her city will naturally read the film in a way that
differs from the reading of someone who lives elsewhere and either has no
direct acquaintance with the city at all or has only a superficial relationship to
it (as in the case of a tourist). Moreover, even those who reside in the city will
read the film differently, depending on their age, gender, class, sexual orienta-
tion, nationality, ethnicity, and so on. In a sense, what we have are the multiple
and sometimes conflicting acts of authorship of the film’s creators and the
film’s interpreters, each of whom imbues the film with specific meanings. As
storytelling beings, we create our own story around the stories that others have
created for us.

Building on the idea of authorship, this study examines the manner in
which a director deploys cinematic elements to establish a setting, tell a story,
and evoke a response in the audience. Broadly speaking, these elements can
be described under three headings: spatiality, visuality, and orality. Although
these are features of every film, I will focus here on how they operate in urban

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cinema in particular. Each director manipulates these elements in distinctive ways to conjure up his or her own vision of a particular urban reality—the physical space and experiential texture of a city.

Spatiality
The first element that needs to be addressed in unravelling the complexity of urban representation is the concept of space—urban space versus rural space, urban darkness versus rural light, urban personae versus the personae of the land, all of which are historically and culturally informed. How we construct, view, and use space is socially and culturally determined. In The Production of Space, the Marxist philosopher and social critic Henri Lefebvre argues that urban space is constructed through a dialectical interaction among three modes of production: spatial practice (l’espace perçu), or space as perceived and defined through the activities of daily life; the representation of space (l’espace conçu), or space as conceptualized by planners, urban theorists, economists, and other professionals, in accordance with normative ideologies; and representational space (l’espace vécu), or “living” space, space as the locus of imaginative meaning or interpretation. While the first two modes of constructing space do exert an influence on both the filmmaker and the audience, it is the third that is most directly relevant to the discussion of urban space in film. Monumental buildings, temples and churches, commercial towers, even ordinary neighbourhoods constitute distinct cultural realities, each with numerous signifiers and pathways to meaning. There is a complexity in how we and the filmmaker conceive and navigate urban space that allows numerous imaginative variations on that space to emerge. Whereas “place” is primarily something physical, determined by geography, space is also delineated by the elastic contours of individual psychology and the numerous cultural frameworks that inform that psychology.

I use the term spatiality to signify the sum total of a site’s physical and psychological associations, which viewers understand as having a particular meaning within the context of a film. In comparison to the standard cinematic framing of rural space, urban spatiality is more enclosed, less panoramic, and more compact. Perspective is typically short and intense in the urban film, rather than expansive and distant. Because urban space tends to be confined,
urban scenes do not lend themselves to the lyrical romanticism so often associated with cinematic depictions of the open land. The 1991 film *Black Robe*, mentioned earlier, offers a good example of this lyricism. The film employs panoramic camera angles, accompanied by rhapsodic music, to express the vast space of seventeenth-century Huron territory, as the tiny missionary canoes transit its empty immensity—cinematic techniques that would make little sense if employed in relation to a city. Emptiness in a landscape evokes awe; in a city, emptiness evokes fear. Since urban space is meant to be densely inhabited, the lack of human presence in a city is read as abnormal and threatening; in the wilderness, in contrast, emptiness symbolizes the pristine—the undeﬁled. As a human construct, a city incarnates all the negativity that our cultural messaging has created about human nature, from Promethean hubris to sexual appetites. Nevertheless, the filmmaker can infuse the city with a redemptive quality, giving it a body inscribed with positive meaning.

In Denys Arcand’s *Jésus de Montréal*, for example, the vaulted ceilings of church architecture are contrasted with the deadly, tomb-like spaces of the Métro, whereby the urban body becomes associated with the dead Christ. The basilica (heaven) and the subway (hell) are uniﬁed into a single metaphoric sculpture by shared elements of space (emptiness), architecture (enclosing walls), and sound (similar music ﬁlls both spaces). By establishing a striking equivalency between contemporary urban space and the historical space of Jerusalem, Arcand incarnates the sacred within the secular. In Guy Maddin’s *Saddest Music in the World*, the urban body is instead presented as a steamy, interior space, an arena in which humanity entertains itself to while away the time as it is besieged by an endless winter. Given that this ﬁlm’s plot is driven by a conﬂict between the power of money and the power of love, its contrast of inner and outer urban space becomes a metaphor. The icy, forbidding landscape of Winnipeg’s outdoors represents the coldness and heartlessness of money and its power to constrict, while the indoor space of the arena, in which people perform in order to win that money, represents the life of desire. Whereas Arcand creates an urban body whose spaces carry religious connotations, Maddin gives us an urban body whose psychology (its inner self) is in competition with its physical, outer self (the skin of winter). The directors who, as cinematic auteurs, create these imagined urban bodies are both subjective observers (self-watchers) and objective carriers (projecting
dreamers) of their specific urban cultures. Their cinematic constructions of urban space are radically different, reflecting not only the differences between the two cities but also the differing artistic visions and urban experiences of the two directors.

Representations of urban space in recent Canadian cinema capture what Allan Siegel has called the “practices of spatialization at a particular historical moment.” Because, as Lefebvre argues, urban space is dialectically constructed, the ways in which urban space is conceptualized and experienced evolve over time, in accordance with shifting social and ideological circumstances. Urban space thus tends to be contested space, a universe within which diverse perspectives compete. The postmodern Canadian city, especially, is anything but homogenous. By populating urban space with characters who differ in social class, race and/or ethnicity, age, religious background, sexual orientation, world view, and so on, Canadian urban filmmakers both capture and embrace the conflicts of urban life, variously producing heroic or anti-heroic sagas. Historically and ideologically, however, urban space in Canada is itself imbued with the garrison mentality and its characteristic insecurity. Perhaps as a defense against that insecurity, the city is most often represented in Canadian urban cinema as an isolated cosmos, without reference to the land. As a circumscribed space, the city can achieve a totality and coherence all its own, with filmmakers ignoring what exists outside its perimeter. This sense of an urban body that is a world unto itself rests on the conceptual (and emotional) annihilation of the at once threatening and desired rural Other projected by the garrison mentality. This annihilation of the rural is destined to fail, however, because, as it constructs and delimits urban space, the garrison mentality is subconsciously aware of, and in competition with, its Other.

Visuality

Canada’s greatest thinker on visual media, Marshall McLuhan, although dealing primarily with the phenomenon of television and its impact on cultural discourse, gave the eye a sensual primacy that is retained in cinema. We go to “see” a film; we don’t go to “hear” it (even though sound has been integral to the experience of film for some eighty years). At least as much as on dialogue,
the audience’s reading of characters and settings is based on the visual information presented in a film.

*Visuality* refers to the manner in which a film conveys meaning and emotion through its framing of specific visual images, which takes place within the broader space established in the film. By consciously delimiting that space and framing visual images in certain ways, the director can focus the viewers’ attention on a specific detail or manipulate their perceptions so as to create a certain mood or awareness. The camera can create a hot or cold city, a bright or dark space, an image of cleanliness or filth, all of which have culturally conditioned meanings for the audience. The creative eye of the director (and/or the cinematographer) constructs a vision, one in which viewers see only what the camera allows them to see. The director’s gaze becomes the viewer’s gaze. By *gaze* I mean both the perspective established by the film’s creators, who make culturally informed choices on how to present the action of the film, and the reciprocal gaze of the audience members, who view and interpret the images depicted on the screen. Although the gaze offered to the viewer is sometimes determined by the conventions of a genre, it more often represents the dramatic imperative of the director, whose narrative unfolds for the audience through a carefully crafted series of visual statements.

Because Canadian narrative cinema is not a popular cinema in the Hollywood mode of appealing to a mass audience, idiosyncratic directorial visions can proliferate. But these visions must contend with the fact that Canadian cinema is almost literally unseen, and audiences are thus blind to its often innovative use of visuality: they have no frame of reference. Canadian audiences are accustomed to Hollywood films and have unconsciously absorbed certain systems of visual signification. To the extent that Canadian directors depart from Hollywood norms, the visual content of their films can seem alien and unexpected, as if the film is speaking in a visual language that its audience cannot comprehend. At the same time, Canadian films frequently employ images and urban settings that audiences recognize as distinctly Canadian and that provide a point of entry or identification. In other words, Canadian audiences can view Canadian cinematic imagery in two ways: either as anomalous and bizarre, perhaps to the point of incomprehensibility, or as profoundly expressive of an urban identity in which audience members are able to recognize themselves. These contradictory or oppositional readings
mean that Canadian cinema can pose something of a challenge for the majority of film audiences, even as it creates a strong sense of difference from, or otherness to, the American cinema to which they are accustomed. Curiously, the very displacement of Canadian cinema to a position of cultural marginality gives it an edge, a tension—an expressive anxiety rooted in marginality itself.

Any consideration of cinematic imagery must acknowledge that visuality, as it exists both in the film product itself and in the viewing experience of the audience, is presently mutating. Because a film’s visual content is increasingly viewed not in theatres but on various kinds of digital screens, from laptop computers to smart phones, McLuhan’s insights about the visual impact of television now extend to film: the two now appear on similar platforms. This integration of television and film began much earlier, of course, when films previously released in theatres were later screened on television. The earlier stand-alone cinematic experience as a theatrical moment has continued a migration onto other platforms (beginning with television sixty years ago), in ways that transform both spatiality and visuality. These new sites of presentation radically transform both visual images and the viewer’s experience. Digital modes of delivery not only flatten and shrink the image recorded on film but frequently distort its original shape. Details that can easily be read on a theatrical screen become all but invisible, while the proportional relationship between the cinematic image and its immediate surroundings is essentially reversed. The gigantic screen of the theatre, which encompasses the viewer’s entire field of vision, is replaced by an image that must compete for the viewer’s attention with peripheral visual information. Moreover, whereas in the medium of film images are projected onto the screen, from a place behind the viewer, digital media project visual material outward, directly at the viewer (as in television). In McLuhan’s terms, a hot medium has become a cool one.

Cinema scholar Stephen Barber points out that the contemporary period in visual reproduction is therefore a liminal one: the age of filmic creation and digital creation are overlapping. Barber argues that digital media create a different kind of spectatorship, one that involves an “un-screening” of the filmic experience, with the traditional theatrical experience relegated to an archive. The concept of un-screening might also be termed “post-screening,” in the sense that the original, singular experience of theatrical projection has migrated onto a variety of platforms (beginning with television), yielding a
multiplicity of viewing experiences that are increasing under the audience’s control. The way a film is viewed, as well as where and when it is viewed, is now predominantly a matter of the viewer’s discretion. Although, for the most part, the visual thinking of filmmakers remains keyed to the theatrical screen, this screen is increasingly irrelevant to the consumption of film. It seems likely, then, that, in the not-too-distant future, filmmakers will cease to frame images with the theatrical screen in mind and will instead create images intended for digital delivery. The films discussed here, however, were made to be shown in theatres, and what this study has to say about urban film remains tied to the era of theatrical projection, even as this form of viewing is being increasingly compartmentalized through the proliferation of new media.

Because digital technology is currently reconfiguring so much of human experience, it is also be altering our experience of the urban. In *A Theory of Urbanity* (1998), Anton Zijderveld responds to the postmodernist view that digital technologies have rendered the world “increasingly fragmented and borderless,” with the result that the very idea of a distinct urban culture has become “superfluous” and even “meaningless.” According to this view, in response to the technological imperative of modernization, the cities of the world are becoming homogenized, while at the same time the increasing power of that imperative makes the distinctions among them irrelevant for those who live in them. Zijderveld rejects this argument on the grounds that it constructs urban life as “a meaningless and abstract order,” without reference to interurban diversity or even concrete reality. Our absorption with cyberspace may be an increasing aspect of contemporary life, but our human needs—for food and shelter, transportation, and so on—and our economic activities and social interactions persist despite this absorption. As long as people continue to live in the physical space of a city and experience its sensual reality, each city will retain its distinctive character, and artists will strive to capture that distinctness.

**Orality**

While narrative cinema is considered primarily a visual art, it also depends heavily on dialogue and sound, not only to convey information that moves the plot forward but to create character and mood. Along with their physical appearance, including the clothing they wear, what the characters in a film
say, and how they say it, establishes their identities. In addition, a film uses background music, ambient location sounds, and imported sounds to create a complex and integrated soundscape. Together these elements constitute the orality of the film. Orality plays a vital role in the audience’s response to a film. What viewers hear creates an additional field of meaning that helps them to interpret what they are seeing. While orality is often considered secondary to a film’s visuality, the audience’s experience of sound in the film may actually be a primary field of meaning. In the era of silent cinema, filmmakers relied on intertitles to enable the audience to better grasp what was happening on screen, and theatre owners generally arranged for live music to accompany the film. These were attempts to emulate the orality of human storytelling. In this study, spatiality, visuality, and orality are given equal status: there is no subordination of one to another.

Narrative film employs orality in a manner distinct from that of the documentary. In its classic form, the documentary relies on a diegetic mode of storytelling, often in the form of a voice-over: a disembodied voice, that of the omniscient narrator, guides the viewer’s interpretation of the images on the screen. The film may also feature other speakers (such as interview subjects) who likewise furnish information or provide impressions that we assume to be reliable. The audience is passive more than active: we are invited to listen more than to interpret and evaluate. In contrast, storytelling in narrative films is mimetic. Such films depend on a dialogical multiplicity of voices, through which the film’s narrative emerges. There is no single, authoritative voice, no unified interpretation, but rather many voices that give us information from a variety of sometimes conflicting perspectives. This multiplicity is especially appropriate to urban cinema: the contemporary city is profoundly polyphonic. Filmmakers can thus employ orality in ways that express the diversity of urban voices and cultures, in order to capture the heterogeneity characteristic of contemporary urban reality in Canada.

**Urbanity and Identity**

The urban world is a human construct, both physically and ideologically, with the result that every city has its own peculiar identity, its own spirit, as well as
its own history, through which it is embedded in national (and perhaps international) mythologies. It is this peculiar character—a city’s aura—to which filmmakers are responding when they portray a particular city on the screen. I use the term urbanity to refer to the overall impression of a city that filmmakers create in the course of their narrative representation. A film’s urbanity consists in the way that the story, the characters, and the cinematic techniques used by the filmmaker combine to create a singular sense of the city in which the film is set. The filmmaker imbues the city with a particular aura, to which we in turn respond: we are able to read that city as having certain characteristics. These characteristics arise from the filmmaker’s personal experience with the city, as well as his or her identity and background (including ethnic ties, religious heritage, gender and sexual orientation, generation, and class affiliations) and cinematic values. Toronto, as imagined by Atom Egoyan in Exotica, has a distinct cinematic urbanity, which differs from the urbanity of Toronto that emerges in Clement Virgo’s Rude. While, for example, Rude is dominated by its Caribbean Canadian characters and ghetto locale, Exotica establishes a multicultural and multiracial framework, in which Caribbean characters appear in a peripheral manner, as one element among many. Egoyan has his Toronto, and Virgo has his—and, as an audience, we benefit from this diversity of viewpoints.

In one respect, then, a film’s urbanity is a subjective phenomenon, the product of the influences at work in the inner life of the filmmaker. But urbanity can also be analyzed in terms of its outward manifestations, as seen through the lens of various disciplines. First, one can speak most obviously of the physicality, or architecture, of urban space, which varies from city to city. Second, urbanity encompasses the ecology of urban environments. The city is akin to an ecosystem, the various components of which interact, while the system as a whole also interacts with the broader environment. The way in which a filmmaker captures this urban ecology enhances our understanding of how the system evolves and the imbalances that can disturb it. Third, urbanity involves a general mood that can be ascribed to a specific city—a psychology that informs its character, its emotional texture, and its guiding ethos. Fourth, urbanity reflects the philosophy of the city, an idea or theoretical construct that is meant both to encompass and to explain the meaning of the city—its “truth.” In the filmmaker’s mind, this meaning can coalesce into a single key metaphor or fundamental insight about the characteristics of a city. Fifth, urbanity references the economics or
work life of a city, including its diverse commercial enterprises and its manufacturing, transportation, and service industries. Sixth, urbanity deals with the technology embodied in urban life and how it impinges on human life. Seventh, there is the sociology of urban life, to which the ethnic diversity of the city contributes. Eighth, there is the aesthetics of urbanity—the artistic framing of urban spaces and their inhabitants that gives these spaces colour and vitality. Finally, each city has a history, the story of its beginnings and its evolution across time. Balancing this sense of history is the speculative or utopian vision of a city’s future—a dream of becoming and surpassing, often called “progress,” or its opposite, a dystopian future of gradual decay, of unravelling and decline. Although the study of visions is not a discipline, this visionary quality is a crucial aspect of urbanity, one that allows filmmakers to imagine a city’s potential tomorrows. One can thus speak of the “sociological” orientation of a film, or its “historical” dimensions, or its “psychological” focus, all of which both reflect and express the forces that have shaped the director’s experience.

Filmmakers, like other artists who work with urban themes, sense what Zijderveld calls the “solidarity, worldview, and ethos” that constitute a particular city and then articulate it in their own way. These filmmakers create multiple variations on a single city, depending on their own subjectivity. Just as a multidisciplinary perspective presents the same city from different angles, films about a particular Canadian city will offer differing representations of that city, no one of which is definitive. The identity of the city, like Canadian identity itself, appears in a series of fragments, all of them partial—nor, taken together, do they yield a consistent or comprehensive portrait. This postmodern emphasis on difference, on multiplicity and incompleteness, runs throughout this study, suggesting that “urban cinema” is itself a construct that lacks a unified referent.

To determine how a city is represented through the eyes of a filmmaker and how the city influences the films of that filmmaker, one can examine the cultural values that the film exhibits. Pamela Hutton notes that, “the material environment, social customs, and linguistic usage create a collective psychological milieu in which the individual mind is immersed.” Although a filmmaker’s reading of a city will always be personal and idiosyncratic, filmmakers necessarily exist within this broader psychological milieu, and the fact that they speak in part from a shared psychosocial foundation allows their
films to resonate with others. This immersion in the collectivity infuses that director’s creative output with a public meaning, as well as a private one.

R. Bruce Elder, in his groundbreaking philosophical work on Canadian film and culture, *Image and Identity* (1989), rightly criticizes the obsessive search for distinctive or defining features of Canadian culture on the grounds that this preoccupation distracts us from trying to understand the deeper elements of human identity and their artistic expression. The notion of an urban self may well be one of the deeper elements of Canadian identity, one that manifests itself in the urb anxiety framed by a filmmaker. By focusing on how filmmakers give artistic expression to the cities in which they live and work and on how their art is influenced by these cities, this study tries to deepen our understanding of Canadian identity. In so doing, it calls into question the quest for some unique and overarching definition of “Canada” so beloved of modernism. The concept of the urban self, with its emphasis on diverse and potentially disruptive voices, undermines the illusion of a unified identity. In place of national space, the urban imaginary posits a postnational space, or spaces in which “discourses are transnational.” In this formulation, the national question is subordinated to a discussion of issues that either lie outside national discourse altogether or concern multiple places and spaces, heavily influenced and framed by urban life itself. In the early twenty-first century, all Canadian urban spaces have become the site of transnational discourses. This splintering of identity does not, however, weaken the claim that Canadian cities open up an alternative paradigm of national identity. By allowing urban individuality and community identities to express themselves and to challenge the validity of a homogeneous view of Canadianness, the urban imaginary places heterogeneity at the core of identity.

As we have seen, films about city space and life deal with factors disquieting to the rural myth—issues of cosmopolitanism, materialism, sexuality, racial and cultural diversity, radicalism and liberalism, sexual deviance and violent transgressiveness, suburban dysfunction, economic oppression, and global political influences (to name a few). But, historically, the rural myth has been so strongly attached to the urban psyche that it has created within that psyche a kind of self-alienation. Because the cityscape is in a constant state of flux brought on by rapid historical change, urban dwellers imagine the land and rural life as unchanging and, perhaps, as superior to their own universe.
of flux. Given that, in the nationalist-realist ideology, urbanism was accorded the inferior position in the urban-rural relationship, filmmakers may have trouble conceiving of the city as a dominant paradigm of identity. Moreover, self-doubts about the urban imaginary’s credibility as an alternative narrative encourage a rejection of any kind of ideological or messianic mission among those who are nonetheless aligned with this new perspective. These filmmakers rightly reject the old narrative, the myth of a unified national identity, but they also have little interest in replacing it. Perhaps for that reason, that myth hangs over the urban imaginary vision like a repressive authority figure. When a filmmaker generates a narrative about an urban self, whether individual or collective, it is almost inevitably a conflicted one.

The urban imaginary is based on diverse cultural discourses more concerned with self-expression than with formulating definitions and imposing them on others. This liberates the individual self from older constructions, but it also leaves the wider audience to its own devices, with the concomitant risk of a relapse into the nationalist-realism of the past. Because of the limited audience in Canada for its own narrative cinema, the chances of the urban imaginary becoming a dominant cultural discourse are probably slim. In contrast, Québec films, which have a much greater penetration in the francophone market, can be said to provide a valid paradigm for the evolution of Québec society in the postmodern period. The tiny intellectual elite in English Canada that cares about postmodern Canadian feature films can only stand in envy of the reception awarded to Québec film, which has come to constitute a national cinema among its own people. Not only is Canadian cinematic reality divided, thus regionalizing the impact of the urban imaginary, but it is also being assaulted by the digital age and its global prerogatives.

Marc Eli Blanchard has argued elegantly that every city exudes a mythic quality and that every city has a hold on the human imagination by which it is metaphorized and anthropomorphized.30 Canadian cities are, and will remain, central to the lives of Canadians. As long as there are cinematic representations of the lives lived in these cities—however constructed, transmitted, or viewed—films will continue to capture and communicate a vibrant sense of the urban that dominates the consciousness and self-image of twenty-first-century Canadians.